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BSA

CONFIDENTIAL



APRIL-MAY 1953

AMAZING STORIES

VOL. 77 NO. 2

# AMAZING

STORIES

35¢

**MARS CONFIDENTIAL!**

Jack Lait & Lee Mortimer

**NEW! COMPLETE!**

**Dramatic Science Fiction**

Robert Heinlein   Ray Bradbury  
H. L. Gold   Theodore Sturgeon

# to quote:



## ROBERT HEINLEIN

"My literary habits consist mainly of a running fight to stay away from people, telephones, and correspondence long enough to get stories written down. I've no particular knowledge of the techniques of writing fiction and am afraid to find out, remembering what happened to the centipede who was asked how he handled his legs. I become very attached to my characters and kill them off reluctantly. Am married to a wonderful rarity: an even-tempered redhead."



## MURRAY LEINSTER

"I was a professional writer long before I could vote, and to date have had published about 1,300 stories, 29 books, some motion-pictures, radio and TV plays. I've been published in 12 languages besides English, and in Braille. My hobby, naturally, is gadgets. I live in a house that was built in 1650, where I enjoy writing about life in 2650."



## H. L. GOLD

"I'm 5-9, weigh 155 stripped, was born in Montreal and educated in the U. S., am married and have one son. While learning to write I held the usual jobs: junior pharmacist, shoe salesman, floor scraper, apprentice upholsterer, etc. My favorite job, though, was the one where I used to drown—so that life-guard students could practice rescue on me. I've written and sold over 5,000,000 words under 32 pen names, edited or published more than two dozen magazines in various fields."

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# AMAZING

## STORIES

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# MARS CONFIDENTIAL!

## Jack Lait & Lee Mortimer

*Here is history's biggest news scoop! Those intrepid reporters Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, whose best-selling exposes of life's seamy side from New York to Medicine Hat have made them famous, here strip away the veil of millions of miles to bring you the lowdown on our sister planet. It is an amazing account of vice and violence, of virtues and victims, told in vivid, jet-speed style.*

*Here you'll learn why Mars is called the Red Planet, the part the Mafia plays in her undoing, the rape and rapine that has made this heavenly body the cesspool of the Universe. In other words, this is Mars -- Confidential!*

P-o-o-o-t!

HERE WE GO AGAIN —  
Confidential.

We turned New York inside out. We turned Chicago upside down. In Washington we turned the insiders out and the outsiders in. The howls can still be heard since we dissected the U.S.A.

But Mars was our toughest task of spectroscoping. The cab

drivers spoke a different language and the bell-hops couldn't read our currency. Yet, we think we have X-rayed the dirtiest and this may amaze you — the dirtiest planet in the solar system. Beside it, the Earth is as white as the Moon, and Chicago is as peaceful as the Milky Way.

By the time we went through Mars — its canals, its caves, its



Illustration: L. B. Satterton

satellites and its catacombs — we knew more about it than anyone who lives there.

We make no attempt to be comprehensive. We have no hope or aim to make Mars a better place in which to live; in fact, we don't give a damn what kind of a place it is to live in.

This will be the story of a planet that could have been another proud and majestic sun with a solar system of its own; it ended up, instead, in the comic books and the pulp magazines.

We give you **MARS CONFIDENTIAL!**

## I THE LOWDOWN CONFIDENTIAL

**B**EFORE the space ship which brings the arriving traveler lands at the Martian National Airport, it swoops gracefully over the nearby city in a salute. The narrow ribbons, laid out in geometric order, gradually grow wider until the water in these man-made rivers becomes crystal clear and sparkles in the reflection of the sun.

As Mars comes closer, the visitor from Earth quickly realizes it has a manner and a glamor of its own; it is unworldly, it is out of this world. It is not the air of distinction one finds in New York or London or Paris. The Martian feeling is dreamlike; it comes from

being close to the stuff dreams are made of.

However, after the sojourner lands, he discovers that Mars is not much different than the planet he left; indeed, men are pretty much the same all over the universe, whether they carry their plumbing inside or outside their bodies.

As we unfold the rates of crime, vice, sex irregularities, graft, cheap gambling, drunkenness, rowdyism and rackets, you will get, thrown on a large screen, a peep show you never saw on your TV during the science-fiction hour.

Each day the Earth man spends on Mars makes him feel more at home; thus, it comes as no surprise to the initiated that even here, at least 35,000,000 miles away from Times Square, there are hoodlums who talk out of the sides of their mouths and drive expensive convertibles with white-walled tires and yellow-haired frails. For the Mafia, the dread Black Hand, is in business here — tied up with the subversives — and neither the Martian Committee for the Investigation of Crime and Vice, nor the Un-Martian Activities Committee, can dent it more than the Kefauver Committee did on Earth, which is practically less than nothing.

This is the first time this story has been printed. We were offered four trillion dollars in bribes to

hold it up; our lives were threatened and we were shot at with death ray guns.

We got this one night on the fourth bench in Central Park, where we met by appointment a man who phoned us earlier but refused to tell his name. When we took one look at him we did not ask for his credentials, we just knew he came from Mars.

This is what he told us:

Shortly after the end of World War II, a syndicate composed of underworld big-shots from Chicago, Detroit and Greenpoint planned to build a new Las Vegas in the Nevada desert. This was to be a plush project for big spenders, with Vegas and Reno reserved for the hoi-polloi.

There was to be service by a private airline. It would be so ultra-ultra that suckers with only a million would be thumbed away and guys with two million would have to come in through the back door.

The Mafia sent a couple of front men to explore the desert. Somewhere out beyond the atom project they stumbled on what seemed to be the answer to their prayer.

It was a huge, mausoleum-like structure, standing alone in the desert hundreds of miles from nowhere, unique, exclusive and mysterious. The prospectors assumed it was the last remnant of some fabulous and long-dead ghost-mining town.

The entire population consisted of one, a little duffer with a white goatee and thick lensed spectacles, wearing boots, chaps and a silk hat.

"This your place, bud?" one of the hoods asked.

When he signified it was, the boys bought it. The price was agreeable — after they pulled a wicked-looking rod.

Then the money guys came to look over their purchase. They couldn't make head or tail of it, and you can hardly blame them, because inside the great structure they found a huge contraption that looked like a cigar (Havana Perfecto) standing on end.

"What the hell is this," they asked the character in the opera hat, in what is known as a menacing attitude.

The old pappy guy offered to show them. He escorted them into the cigar, pressed a button here and there, and before you could say "Al Capone" the roof of the shed slid back and they began to move upward at a terrific rate of speed.

Three or four of the Mafia chieftains were old hop-heads and felt at home. In fact, one of them remarked, "Boy, are we gone." And he was right.

The soberer Mafistas, after recovering from their first shock, laid ungentle fists on their conductor.



"What goes on?" he was asked.

"This is a space ship and we are headed for Mars."

"What's Mars?"

"A planet up in space, loaded with gold and diamonds."

"Any bims there?"

"I beg your pardon, sir. What are bims?"

"Get a load of this dope. He never heard of bims. Babes, broads, frills, pigeons, ribs — catch on?"

"Oh, I assume you mean girls. There must be, otherwise what are the diamonds for?"

The outward trip took a week, but it was spent pleasantly. During that time, the Miami delegation cleaned out Chicago, New York and Pittsburgh in a klabiash game.

The hop back, for various reasons, took a little longer. One reason may have been the condition of the crew. On the return the boys from Brooklyn were primed to the ears with *zorkle*.

*Zorkle* is a Martian medicinal distillation, made from the milk of the *schnoogle* — a six-legged cow, seldom milked because few Martians can run fast enough to catch one. *Zorkle* is strong enough to rip steel plates out of battleships, but to stomachs accustomed to the stuff sold in Flatbush, it acted like a gentle stimulant.

Upon their safe landing in Nevada, the Columbuses of this first flight to Mars put in long-

distance calls to all the other important hoods in the country.

The Crime Cartel met in Cleveland — in the third floor front of a tenement on Mayfield Road. The purpose of the meeting was to "cut up" Mars.

Considerable dissension arose over the bookmaking facilities, when it was learned that the radioactive surface of the planet made it unnecessary to send scratches and results by wire. On the contrary, the steel-shod hooves of the animals set up a current which carried into every pool room, without a pay-off to the wire service.

The final division found the apportionment as follows:

*New York mob:* Real estate and investments (if any)

*Chicago mob:* Bookmaking and liquor (if any)

*Brooklyn mob:* Protection and assassinations

*Jersey mob:* Numbers (if any) and craps (if any)

*Los Angeles mob:* Girls (if any)

*Galveston and New Orleans mobs:* Dope (if any)

*Cleveland mob:* Casinos (if any)

*Detroit mob:* Summer resorts (if any)

The Detroit boys, incidentally, burned up when they learned the Martian year is twice as long as ours, consequently it takes two years for one summer to roll around.

After the summary demise of three Grand Councilors whose deaths were recorded by the press as occurring from "natural causes," the other major and minor mobs were declared in as partners.

The first problem to be ironed out was how to speed up transportation; and failing that, to construct spacious space ships which would attract pleasure-bent trade from *Terra* — Earth to you — with such innovations as roulette wheels, steam rooms, cocktail lounges, double rooms with hot and cold babes, and other such inducements.

## II THE INSIDE STUFF CONFIDENTIAL

Remember, you got this first from Lait and Mortimer. And we defy anyone to call us liars — and prove it!

Only chumps bring babes with them to Mars. The temperature is a little colder there than on Earth and the air a little thinner. So *Terra* dames complain one mink coat doesn't keep them warm; they need two.

On the other hand, the gravity

is considerably less than on Earth. Therefore, even the heaviest bim weighs less and can be pushed over with the greatest of ease.

However, the boys soon discovered that the lighter gravity played havoc with the marijuana trade. With a slight tensing of the muscles you can jump 20 feet, so why smoke "tea" when you can fly like crazy for nothing?

Martian women are bags, so perhaps you had better disregard the injunction above and bring your own, even if it means two furs.

Did you ever see an Alaska *klatch* (pronounced *klotch*)? Probably not. Well, these Arctic horrors are Ziegfeld beauts compared to the Martian fair sex.

They slouch with knees bent and knuckles brushing the ground, and if Ringling Bros. is looking for a mate for Gargantua, here is where to find her. Yet, their manner is habitually timid, as though they've been given a hard time. From the look in their deep-set eyes they seem to fear abduction or rape; but not even the zoot-suited goons from Greenpernt gave them a second tumble.

The visiting Mafia delegation was naturally disappointed at this state of affairs. They had been led to believe by the little guy who escorted them that all Martian dames resembled Marilyn Monroe, only more so, and the men were Adonises (and not Joe).

Seems they once were, at that. This was a couple of aeons ago when Earthmen looked like Martians do now, which seems to indicate that Martians, as well as Men, have their ups and downs.

The citizens of the planet are apparently about halfway down the toboggan. They wear clothes, but they're not handstitched. Their neckties don't come from Sulka. No self-respecting goon from Gowanus would care to be seen in their company.

The females always appear in public fully clothed, which doesn't help them either. But covering their faces would. They buy their dresses at a place called Kress-Worth and look like Paris *non-sensu riche*.

There are four separate nations there, though nation is hardly the word. It is more accurate to say there are four separate clans that don't like each other, though how they can tell the difference is beyond us. They are known as the East Side, West Side, North Side and Gas House gangs.

Each stays in its own backyard. Periodic wars are fought, a few thousand of the enemy are dissolved with ray guns, after which the factions retire by common consent and throw a banquet at which the losing country is forced to take the wives of the victors, which is a twist not yet thought of on Earth.

Martian language is unlike

anything ever heard below. It would baffle the keenest linguist, if the keenest linguist ever gets to Mars. However, the Maha, which is a world-wide blood brotherhood with colonies in every land and clime, has a universal language. Knives and brass knucks are understood everywhere.

The Martian lingo seems to be somewhat similar to Chinese. It's not what they say, but how they say it. For instance, *paongule* may mean "I love you" or "you dirty son-of-a-bitch."

The Mafistas soon learned to translate what the natives were saying by watching the squint in their eyes. When they spoke with a certain expression, the mobstebs let go with 45s, which, however, merely have a stunning effect on the gent on the receiving end because of the lesser gravity.

On the other hand, the Martian death ray guns were not fatal to the toughs from Earth; anyone who can live through St. Valentine's Day in Chicago can live through anything. So it came out a dead beat.

Thereupon the boys from the Syndicate sat down and declared the Martians in for a fifty-fifty partnership, which means they actually gave them one per cent, which is generous at that.

Never having had the great advantages of a New Deal, the Martians are still backward and use gold as a means of exchange.

With no Harvard bigdomes to tell them gold is a thing of the past, the yellow metal circulates there as freely and easily as we once kicked pennies around before they became extinct here.

The Mafistas quickly set the Martians right about the futility of gold. They eagerly turned it over to the Earthmen in exchange for green certificates with pretty pictures engraved thereon.

### III

#### RACKETS VIA ROCKETS

Gold, platinum, diamonds and other precious stuff are as plentiful on Mars as hayfever is on Earth in August.

When the gangsters lamped the loot, their greedy eyes and greasy fingers twitched, and when a hood's eyes and fingers twitch, watch out; something is twitching.

The locals were completely honest. They were too dumb to be thieves. The natives were not acquisitive. Why should they be when gold was so common it had no value, and a neighbor's wife so ugly no one would covet her?

This was a desperate situation, indeed, until one of the boys from East St. Louis uttered the eternal truth: "There ain't no honest man who ain't a crook, and why should Mars be any different?"

The difficulty was finding the means and method of corruption.

All the cash in Jake Guzik's strong box meant nothing to a race of characters whose brats made mudpies of gold dust.

The discovery came as an accident.

The first Earthman to be eliminated on Mars was a two-bit hood from North Clark Street who sold a five-cent Hershey bar with almonds to a Martian for a gold piece worth 94 bucks.

The man from Mars bit the candy bar. The hood bit the gold piece.

Then the Martian picked up a rock and beamed the lad from the Windy City. After which the Martian's eyes dilated and he let out a scream. Then he attacked the first Martian female who passed by. Never before had such a thing happened on Mars, and to say she was surprised is putting it lightly. Thereupon, half the female population ran after the berserk Martian.

When the organization heard about this, an investigation was ordered. That is how the crime trust found out that there is no sugar on Mars; that this was the first time it had ever been tasted by a Martian; that it acts on them like junk does on an Earthman.

They further discovered that the chief source of Martian diet is — believe it or not — poppy seed, hemp and coca leaf, and that the alkaloids thereof: opium, hash-heesh and cocaine have not the

slightest visible effect on them.

Poppies grow everywhere, huge russet poppies, ten times as large as those on Earth and 100 times as deadly. It is these poppies which have colored the planet red. Martians are strictly vegetarian: they bake, fry and stew these flowers and weeds and eat them raw with a goo made from fungus and called *sachemorts* which passes for a salad dressing.

Though the Martians were absolutely impervious to the narcotic qualities of the aforementioned flora, they got higher than Mars on small doses of sugar.

So the Mafia was in business. The Martians sniffed granulated sugar, which they called snow. They ate cube sugar, which they called "hard stuff", and they injected molasses syrup into their veins with hypods and called this "mainliners."

There was nothing they would not do for a pinch of sugar. Gold, platinum and diamonds, narcotics by the acre — these were to be had in generous exchange for sugar — which was selling on Earth at a nickel or so a pound wholesale.

The space ship went into shuttle service. A load of diamonds and dope coming back, a load of sugar and blondes going up. Blondes made Martians higher even than sugar, and brought larger and quicker returns.

This is a confidential tip to the

South African diamond trust: ten space ship loads of precious stones are now being cut in a cellar on Bleecker Street in New York. The mob plans to retail them for \$25 a carat!

Though the gangsters are buying sugar at a few cents a pound here and selling it for its weight in rubies on Mars, a hood is always a hood. They've been cutting dope with sugar for years on Earth, so they didn't know how to do it any different on Mars. What to cut the sugar with on Mars? Simple. With heroin, of course, which is worthless there.

This is a brief rundown on the racket situation as it currently exists on our sister planet.

*FAKED PASSPORTS:* When the boys first landed they found only vague boundaries between the nations, and Martians could roam as they pleased. Maybe this is why they stayed close to home. Though anyway why should they travel? There was nothing to see.

The boys quickly took care of this. First, in order to make travel alluring, they brought 20 strippers from Calumet City and set them peeling just beyond the border lines.

Then they went to the chieftains and sold them a bill of goods (with a generous bribe of sugar) to close the borders. The next step was to corrupt the border guards, which was easy with

Annie Oakleys to do the burlesque shows.

The selling price for faked passports fluctuates between a ton and three tons of platinum.

*VICE:* Until the arrival of the Earthmen, there were no illicit sexual relations on the planet. In fact, no Martian in his right mind would have relations with the native crop of females, and they in turn felt the same way about the males. Laws had to be passed requiring all able-bodied citizens to marry and propagate.

Thus, the first load of hims from South Akard Street in Dallas found eager customers. But these babes, who romanced anything in pants on earth, went on a stand-up strike when they saw and smelled the Martians. Especially smelled. They smelled worse than Texas yahoos just off a cow farm.

This proved embarrassing, to say the least, to the procurers. Considerable sums of money were invested in this human cargo, and the boys feared dire consequences from their shylocks, should they return empty-handed.

In our other Confidential essays we told you how the Mafia employs some of the best brains on Earth to direct and manage its far-flung properties, including high-priced attorneys, accountants, real-estate experts, engineers and scientists.

A hurried meeting of the Grand Council was called and held in a

bungalow on the shores of one of Minneapolis' beautiful lakes. The decision reached there was to corner chlorophyl (which accounts in part for the delay in putting it on the market down here) and ship it to Mars to deodorize the populace there. After which the ladies of the evening got off their feet and went back to work.

*GAMBLING:* Until the arrival of the Mafia, gambling on Mars was confined to a simple game played with children's jacks. The loser had to relieve the winner of his wife.

The Mafia brought up some fine gambling equipment, including the layouts from the Colonial Inn in Florida, and the Beverly in New Orleans, both of which were closed, and taught the residents how to shoot craps and play the wheel, with the house putting up sugar against precious stones and metals. With such odds, it was not necessary to fake the games more than is customary on Earth.

#### IV LITTLE NEW YORK CONFIDENTIAL

Despite what Earth-bound professors tell you about the Martian atmosphere, we know better. They weren't there.

It is a dogma that Mars has no oxygen. Baloney. While it is true that there is considerably less than on Earth in the surface at-

mosphere, the air underground, in caves, valleys and tunnels, has plenty to support life lavishly, though why Martians want to live after they look at each other we cannot tell you, even confidential.

For this reason Martian cities are built underground, and travel between them is carried on through a complicated system of subways predating the New York IRT line by several thousand centuries, though to the naked eye there is little difference between a Brooklyn express and a Mars express, yet the latter were built before the Pyramids.

When the first load of Black Handers arrived, they naturally balked against living underground. It reminded them too much of the days before they went "legitimate" and were constantly on the lam and hiding out.

So the Mafia put the Martians to work building a town. There are no building materials on the planet, but the Martians are adept at making gold dust hold together with diamond rivets. The result of their effort — for which they were paid in peppermint sticks and lump sugar — is named Little New York, with hotels, nightclubs, bars, haberdashers, Turkish baths and horse rooms. Instead of air-conditioning, it had oxygen-conditioning. But the town had no police station.

There were no cops!

Finally, a meeting was held at

which one punk asked another, "What the hell kind of town is it with no cops? Who we going to bribe?"

After some discussion they cut cards. One of the Bergen County boys drew the black ace. "What do I know about being a cop?" he squawked.

"You can take graft, can't you? You been shook down, ain't you?"

The boys also imported a couple of smart mouthpieces and a ship of blank habeas corpus forms, together with a judge who was the brother of one of the lawyers, so there was no need to build a jail in this model city.

The only ones who ever get arrested, anyway, are the Martians, and they soon discovered that the coppers from Terra would look the other way for a bucket full of gold.

Until the arrival of the Earthmen, the Martians were, as stated, peaceful, and even now crime is practically unknown among them. The chief problem, however, is to keep them in line on pay nights, when they go on sugar binges.

Chocolate bars are as common on Mars as saloons are on Broadway, and it is not unusual to see "gone" Martians getting heaved out of these bars right into the gutter. One nostalgic hood from Seattle said it reminded him of Skid Row there.

## V THE RED RED PLANET

The gangsters had not been on Mars long before they heard rumors about other outsiders who were supposed to have landed on the other side of *Mt. Sirsham*.

The boys got together in a cock-tail lounge to talk this over, and they decided they weren't going to stand for any other mobs muscling in.

Thereupon, they despatched four torpedoes with Tommy guns in a big black limousine to see what was going.

We tell you this Confidential. What they found was a Communist apparatus sent to Mars from Soviet Russia.

This cell was so active that Commies had taken over almost half the planet before the arrival of the Mafia, with their domain extending from the *Deucalionis Region* all the way over to *Phaethontis* and down to *Titania*.

Furthermore, through propaganda and infiltration, there were Communist cells in every quarter of the planet, and many of the top officials of the four Martian governments were either secretly party members or openly in fronts.

The Communist battle cry was: "Men of Mars unite; you have nothing to lose but your wives."

Comes the revolution, they were told, and all Martians could remain bachelors. It is no wonder

the Communists made such inroads. The planet became known as "The Red Planet."

In their confidential books about the cities of Earth, Lait and Mortimer explored the community of interest between the organized underworld and the Soviet.

Communists are in favor of anything that causes civil disorder and unrest; gangsters have no conscience and will do business with anyone who pays.

On Earth, Russia floods the Western powers, and especially the United States, with narcotics, first to weaken them and provide easy prey, and second, for dollar exchange.

And on Earth, the Mafia, which is another international conspiracy like the Communists, sells the narcotics.







And so when the gangsters heard there were Communist cells on Mars, they quickly made a contact.

For most of the world's cheap sugar comes from Russia! The Mafia inroad on the American sugar market had already driven cane up more than 300 per cent. But the Russians were anxious, able and willing to provide all the beets they wanted at half the competitive price.

## VI THE HONEST HOODS

As we pointed out in previous works, the crime syndicate now owns so much money, its chief problem is to find ways in which to invest it.

As a result, the Mafia and its allies control thousands of legitimate enterprises ranging from ho-

tel chains to railroads and from laundries to distilleries.

And so it was on Mars. With all the rackets cornered, the gangsters decided it was time to go into some straight businesses.

At the next get-together of the Grand Council, the following conversation was heard:

"What do these mopes need that they ain't getting?"

"A big fat hole in the head."

"Cut it out. This is serious."

"A hole in the head ain't serious?"

"There's no profit in them one-shot deals."

"It's the repeat business you make the dough on."

"Maybe you got something there. You can kill a jerk only once."

"But a jerk can have relatives."

"We're talking about legit stuff,



All the rest has been taken care of."

"With the Martians I've seen, a bar of soap could be a big thing."

From this random suggestion, there sprang up a major inter-planetary project. If the big soap companies are wondering where all that soap went a few years ago, we can tell them.

It went to Mars.

Soap caught on immediately. It was snapped up as fast as it arrived.

But several questions popped into the minds of the Mafia soap salesman.

Where was it all going? A Martian, in line for a bar in the evening, was back again the following morning for another one.

And why did the Martians stay just as dirty as ever?

The answer was, the Martians

stayed as dirty as ever because they weren't using the soap to wash with. They were eating it!

It cured the hangover from sugar.

Another group cornered the undertaking business, adding a twist that made for more activity. They added a Department of Elimination. The men in charge of this end of the business circulate through the chocolate and soap bars, politely inquiring, "Who would you like killed?"

Struck with the novelty of the thing, quite a few Martians remember other Martians they are mad at. The going price is one hundred carats of diamonds to kill; which is cheap considering the average laborer earns 10,000 carats a week.

Then the boys from the more dignified end of the business drop in at the home of the victim and

offer to bury him cheap. Two hundred and fifty carats gets a Martian planted in style.

Inasmuch as Martians live underground, burying is done in reverse, by tying a rocket to the tail of the deceased and shooting him out into the stratosphere.

## VII ONE UNIVERSE CONFIDENTIAL

Mars is presently no problem to Earth, and will not be until we have all its gold and the Martians begin asking us for loans.

Meanwhile, Lait and Mortimer say let the gangsters and communists have it. We don't want it.

We believe Earth would weaken

itself if it dissipated its assets on foreign planets. Instead, we should heavily arm our own satellites, which will make us secure from attack by an alien planet or constellation.

At the same time, we should build an overwhelming force of space ships capable of delivering lethal blows to the outermost corners of the universe and return without refueling.

We have seen the futility of meddling in everyone's business on Earth. Let's not make that mistake in space. We are unalterably opposed to the UP (United Planets) and call upon the governments of Earth not to join that Inter-Solar System boondoggle.

We have enough trouble right here.

## THE APPENDIX CONFIDENTIAL:

*Blast-off:* The equivalent of the take-off of Terran aviation. Space ships blast-off into space. Not to be confused with the report of a sawed-off shot gun.

*Blasting pit:* Place from which a space ship blasts off. Guarded area where the intense heat from the jets melts the ground. Also used for cock-fights.

*Spacemen:* Those who man the space ships. See any comic strip.

*Hairoscope:* A very sensitive instrument for space navigation. The sighting plate thereon is cen-

tered around two crossed hairs. Because of the vastness of space, very fine hairs are used. These hairs are obtained from the Glomph-Frog, found only in the heart of the dense Venusian swamps. The hairscope is a must in space navigation. Then how did they get to Venus to get the hair from the Glomph-Frog? Read Venus Confidential.

*Multiplanetary agitation:* The inter-spatial methods by which the Russians compete for the minds

of the Neptunians and the Plutonians and the Cowanians.

*Space suit:* The clothing worn by those who go into space. The men are put into modernistic diving suits. The dames wear bras and panties.

*Grav-plates:* A form of magnetic shoe worn by spacemen while standing on the outer hull of a space ship halfway to Mars. Why a spaceman wants to stand on the outer hull of a ship halfway to Mars is not clear. Possibly to win a bet.

*Space platform:* A man-made satellite rotating around Earth between here and the Moon. Scientists say this is a necessary first step to interplanetary travel. Mars Confidential proves the fallacy of this theory.

*Space Academy:* A college where young men are trained to be spacemen. The student body consists mainly of cadets who served apprenticeships as elevator jockeys.

*Asteroids:* Tiny worlds floating around in space, put there no doubt to annoy unwary space ships.

*Extrapolation:* The process by which a science-fiction writer takes an established scientific fact and builds thereon a story that couldn't happen in a million years, but maybe 2,000,000.

*Science fiction:* A genre of escape literature which takes the reader to far-away planets — and usually neglects to bring him back.

*S.F.:* An abbreviation for science fiction.

*Bem:* A word derived by using the first letters of the three words: Bug

Eyed Monster. Bems are ghastly looking creatures in general. In science-fiction yarns written by Terrans, bems are natives of Mars. In science-fiction yarns written by Martians, bems are natives of Terra.

*The pit:* The source from which power is derived to carry men to the stars. Optional on the more expensive space ships, at extra cost.

*Atom Master:* A gun carried by spacemen which will melt people down to a cinder. A .45 would do just as well, but then there's the Sullivan Act.

*Orbit:* The path of any heavenly body. The bodies are held in these orbits by natural laws the Republicans are thinking of repealing.

*Nova:* The explosive stage into which planets may pass. According to the finest scientific thinking, a planet will either nova, or it won't.

*Galaxy:* A term used to confuse people who have always called it The Milky Way.

*Sun spots:* Vast electrical storms on the sun which interfere with radio reception, said interference being advantageous during political campaigns.

*Atomic cannons:* Things that go *zap*.

*Audio screen:* Television without Milton Berle or wrestling.

*Disintegrating ray:* Something you can't see that turns something you can see into something you can't see.

*Geiger counter:* Something used to count Geigers.

(Continued on page 161)

# PROJECT NIGHTMARE

by ROBERT HEINLEIN

*You've heard, of course, the theory that an enemy can hide atom bombs in our cities, then call on us to surrender or be blown to bits. Say such bombs were planted; what could we do about it? Find them before they explode? How? No mechanical means exist to do the job, nor can every building in forty cities be searched in, say, two hours. Since Americans don't quit under any circumstances, what's the answer?*

*Robert Heinlein, Mr. Science Fiction himself, has taken this same situation and woven it into an exciting hunk of melodrama. While his solution to the problem is unique and ingenious, it is solidly based on a phenomenon most of us have run across at one time or another.*

FOUR's your point. Roll 'em!"

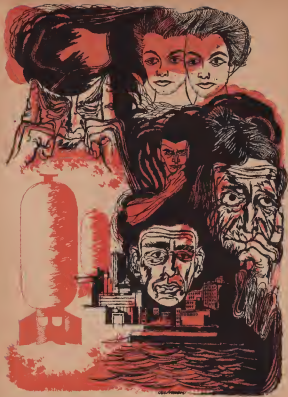
"Anybody want a side bet on double deuces?"

No one answered; the old soldier rattled dice in a glass, pitched them against the washroom wall. One turned up a deuce; the other spun. Somebody yelled, "It's going to five! Come, Phoebe!"

It stopped — a two. The old soldier said, "I told you not to play with me. Anybody want cigarette money?"

"Pick it up, Pop. We don't — oh, oh! 'Tenzkun!"

In the door stood a civilian, a colonel, and a captain. The



civilian said, "Give the money back, Two-Gun."

"Okay, Prof." The old soldier extracted two singles. "That much is mine."

"Stop!" objected the captain. "I'll impound that for evidence. Now, you men —"

The colonel stopped him. "Mick. Forget that you're adjutant. Private Andrews, come along." He went out; the others followed. They hurried through the enlisted men's club, out into desert sunshine and across the quadrangle.

The civilian said, "Two-Gun, what the deuce!"

"Shucks, Prof, I was just practicing."

"Why don't you practice against Grandma Wilkins?"

The soldier snorted. "Do I look silly?"

The colonel put in, "You're keeping a crowd of generals and V.I.P.'s waiting. That isn't bright."

"Colonel Hammond, I was told to wait in the club."

"But not in its washroom. Step it up!"

They went inside headquarters to a hall where guards checked their passes before letting them in. A civilian was speaking: "—and that's the story of the history-making experiments at Duke University. Doctor Reynolds is back; he will conduct the demonstrations."

The officers sat down in the

rear; Dr. Reynolds went to the speaker's table. Private Andrews sat down with a group set apart from the high brass and distinguished civilians of the audience. A character who looked like a professional gambler—and was—sat next to two beautiful red-heads, identical twins. A fourteen-year-old Negro boy slumped in the next chair; he seemed asleep. Beyond him a most wide-awake person, Mrs. Anna Wilkins, tatted and looked around. In the second row were college students and a drab middle-aged man.

The table held a chuck-a-luck cage, packs of cards, scratch pads, a Geiger counter, a lead carrying case. Reynolds leaned on it and said, "Extra-Sensory Perception, or E.S.P., is a tag for little-known phenomena — telepathy, clairvoyance, clairaudience, precognition, telekinesis. They exist; we can measure them; we know that some people are thus gifted. But we don't know how they work. The British, in India during World War One, found that secrets were being stolen by telepathy." Seeing doubt in their faces Reynolds added, "It is conceivable that a spy five hundred miles away is now 'listening in'—and picking your brains of top-secret data."

Doubt was more evident. A four-star Air Force general said,

"One moment, Doctor — if true, what can we do to stop it?"

"Nothing."

"That's no answer. A lead-lined room?"

"We've tried that, General. No effect."

"Jamming with high frequencies? Or whatever 'brain waves' are?"

"Possibly, though I doubt it. If E.S.P. becomes militarily important you may have to operate with all facts known. Back to our program: These ladies and gentlemen are powerfully gifted in telekinesis, the ability to control matter at a distance. Tomorrow's experiment may not succeed, but we hope to convince the doubting Thomases" — he smiled at a man in the rear — "that it is worth trying."

The man he looked at stood up. "General Hanby!"

An Army major general looked around. "Yes, Doctor Withers?"

"I ask to be excused. My desk is loaded with urgent work — and these games have nothing to do with me."

The commanding general started to assert himself; the four-star visitor put a hand on his sleeve. "Doctor Withers, my desk in Washington is piled high, but I am here because the President sent me. Will you please stay? I want a skeptical check on my judgment."

Withers sat down, still angry.

Reynolds continued: "We will start with E.S.P. rather than telekinesis — which is a bit different, anyhow." He turned to one of the redheads. "Jane, will you come here?"

The girl answered, "I'm Joan. Sure."

"All right — Joan. General LaMott, will you draw something on this scratch pad?"

The four-star flyer cocked an eyebrow. "Anything?"

"Not too complicated."

"Right, Doctor." He thought, then began a cartoon of a girl, grinned and added a pop-eyed wolf. Shortly he looked up. "Okay?"

Joan had kept busy with another pad; Reynolds took hers to the general. The sketches were alike — except that Joan had added four stars to the wolf's shoulders. The general looked at her; she looked demure. "I'm convinced," he said drily. "What next?"

"That could be clairvoyance or telepathy," Reynolds lectured. "We will now show direct telepathy." He called the second twin to him, then said, "Doctor Withers, will you help us?"

Withers still looked surly. "With what?"

"The same thing — but Jane will watch over your shoulder while Joan tries to reproduce what you draw. Make it something harder."



"Well . . . okay." He took the pad, began sketching a radio circuit while Jane watched. He signed it with a "Clem", the radioman's cartoon of the little fellow peering over a fence.

"That's fine!" said Reynokla. "Finished, Joan?"

"Yes, Doctor." He fetched her pad; the diagram was correct — but Joan had added to "Clem" a wink.

Reynolds interrupted awed comment with, "I will skip card demonstrations and turn to telekinesis. "Has anyone a pair of dice?" No one volunteered; he went on, "We have some supplied by your physics department. This chuck-a-luck cage is signed and sealed by them and so is this package." He broke it open, spilled out a dozen dice. "Two-Gun, how about some naturals?"

"I'll try, Prof."

"General LaMott, please select a pair and put them in this cup."

The general complied and handed the cup to Andrews. "What are you going to roll, soldier?"

"Would a sixty-five suit the General?"

"If you can."

"Would the General care to put up a five spot, to make it interesting?" He waited, wide-eyed and innocent.

La Mott grinned. "You're faded, soldier." He peeled out a

five; Andrews covered it, rattled the cup and rolled. One die stopped on the fifts — a five. The other bounced against a chair — a six.

"Let it ride, sir?"

"I'm not a sucker twice. Show us some naturals."

"As you say, sir." Two-Gun picked up the money, then rolled 6-1, 5-2, 4-3, and back again. He rolled several 6-1s, then got snake eyes. He tried again, got accey-deucey. He faced the little old lady. "Ma'am," he said, "if you want to roll, why don't you get down here and do the work?"

"Why, Mr. Andrews!"

Reynolds said hastily, "You'll get your turn, Mrs. Wilkins."

"I don't know what you gentlemen are talking about." She resumed tatting.

Colonel Hammond sat down by the redheads. "You're the January Twins — aren't you?"

"Our public!" one answered delightedly.

"The name is 'Brown'," said the other.

"'Brown'," he agreed, "but how about a show for the boys?"

"Dr. Reynolds wouldn't like it," the first said dutifully.

"I'll handle him. We don't get USO; security regulations are too strict. How about it, Joan?"

"I'm Jane. Okay, if you fix it with Prof."

"Good girls!" He went back to where Grandma Wilkins was dem-

onstrating selection — showers of sixes in the chuck-a-luck cage. She was still tatting. Dr. Withers watched glumly. Hammond said, "Well, Doc?"

"These things are disturbing," Withers admitted, "but it's on the molar level — nothing affecting the elementary particles."

"How about those sketches?"

"I'm a physicist, not a psychologist. But the basic particles — electrons, neutrons, protons — can't be affected except with apparatus designed in accordance with the laws of radioactivity!"

Dr. Reynolds was in earshot; at Withers' remark he said, "Thank you, Mrs. Wilkins. Now, ladies and gentlemen, another experiment. Norman!"

The colored boy opened his eyes. "Yeah, Prof?"

"Up here. And the team from your physics laboratory, please. Has anyone a radium-dial watch?"

Staff technicians hooked the Geiger counter through an amplifier so that normal background radioactivity was heard as occasional clicks, then placed a radium-dial watch close to the counter tube; the clicks changed to hail-storm volume. "Lights out, please," directed Reynolds.

The boy said, "Now, Prof?"

"Wait, Norman. Can everyone see the watch?" The silence was broken only by the rattle of the amplifier, counting radioactivity

of the glowing figures. "Now, Norman!"

The shining figures quenched out; the noise died to sparse clicks.

The same group was in a block-house miles out in the desert; more miles beyond was the bomb proving site; facing it was a periscope window set in concrete and glazed with solid feet of laminated filter glass. Dr. Reynolds was talking with Major General Hanby. A naval captain took reports via earphones and speaker horn; he turned to the C.O. "Planes on station, sir."

"Thanks, Dick."

The horn growled, "Station Charlie to Control; we fixed it."

The navy man said to Hanby, "All stations ready, range clear."

"Pick up the count."

"All stations, stand by to resume count at minus seventeen minutes. Time station, pick up the count. This is a live run. Repeat, this is a live run."

Hanby said to Reynolds, "Distance makes no difference?"

"We could work from Salt Lake City once my colleagues knew the setup." He glanced down. "My watch must have stopped."

"Always feels that way. Remember the metronome on the first Bikini test? It nearly drove me nuts."

"I can imagine. Um, General, some of my people are high-strung. Suppose I *ad lib*?"

Hanby smiled grimly. "We al-

ways have a pacifier for visitors. Doctor Withers, ready with your curtain raiser?"

The chief physicist was bending over a group at instruments; he looked tired. "Not today," he answered in a flat voice. "Satterlee will make it."

Satterlee came forward and grinned at the brass and V.I.P.s and at Reynolds' operators. "I've been saving a joke for an audience that can't walk out. But first—" He picked up a polished metal sphere and looked at the E.S.P. adepts. "You saw a ball like this on your tour this morning. That one was plutonium; it's still out there waiting to go bang' in about . . . eleven minutes. This is merely steel — unless someone has made a mistake. That would be a joke — we'd laugh ourselves to bits!"

He got no laugh, went on: "But it doesn't weigh enough; we're safe. This dummy has been prepared so that Dr. Reynolds' people will have an image to help them concentrate. It looks no more like an atom bomb than I look like Stalin, but it represents — if it were plutonium — what we atom tinkers call a 'sub-critical mass'. Since the spy trials everybody knows how an atom bomb works. Plutonium gives off neutrons at a constant rate. If the mass is small, most of them escape to the outside. But if it is large enough, or a critical mass, enough are absorbed by other

nuclei to start a chain reaction. The trick is to assemble a critical mass quickly — then run for your life! This happens in microseconds; I can't be specific without upsetting the security officer.

"Today we will find out if the mind can change the rate of neutron emission in plutonium. By theories sound enough to have destroyed two Japanese cities, the emission of any particular neutron is pure chance, but the total emission is as invariable as the stars in their courses. Otherwise it would be impossible to make atom bombs.

"By standard theory, theory that works, that subcritical mass out there is no more likely to explode than a pumpkin. Our test group will try to change that. They will concentrate, try to increase the probability of neutrons' escaping, and thus set off that sphere as an atom bomb."

"Doctor Satterlee?" asked a vice admiral with wings. "Do you think it can be done?"

"*Absolutely not!*" Satterlee turned to the adepts. "No offense intended, folks."

"Five minutes!" announced the navy captain.

Satterlee nodded to Reynolds. "Take over. And good luck."

Mrs. Wilkins spoke up. "Just a moment, young man. These 'neuter' things. I —"

"Neutrons, madam."

"That's what I said. I don't quite understand. I suppose that sort of thing comes in high school, but I only finished eighth grade. I'm sorry."

Satterlee looked sorry, too, but he tried. "— and each of these nuclei is potentially able to spit out one of these little neutrons. In that sphere out there" — he held up the dummy — "there are, say, five thousand billion trillion nuclei, each one —"

"My, that's quite a lot, isn't it?"

"Madam, it certainly is. Now —"

*"Two minutes!"*

Reynolds interrupted. "Mrs. Wilkins, don't worry. Concentrate on that metal ball out there and think about those neutrons, each one ready to come out. When I give the word, I want you all — you especially, Norman — to think about that ball, spitting sparks like a watch dial. Try for more sparks. Simply try. If you fail, no one will blame you. Don't get tense."

Mrs. Wilkins nodded. "I'll try." She put her fanning down and got a faraway look.

At once they were blinded by unbelievable radiance bursting through the massive filter. It beat on them, then died away.

The naval captain said, "What the hell!" Someone screamed, "It's gone, it's gone!"

The speaker brayed: "Fission

at minus one minute thirty-seven seconds. Control, what went wrong. It looks like a hydrogen —"

The concussion wave hit and all sounds were smothered. Lights went out, emergency lighting clicked on. The blockhouse heaved like a boat in a heavy sea. Their eyes were still dazzled, their ears assaulted by cannonading after-noise, and physicists were elbowing flag officers at the port, when an anguished soprano cut through the din. "Oh, *dear!*"

Reynolds snapped, "What's the matter, Grandma? You all right?"

"Me? Oh, yes, yes — but I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do it."

"Do what?"

"I was just feeling it out, thinking about all those little bitty neutrons, ready to spit. But I didn't mean to make it go off — not till you told us to."

"Oh." Reynolds turned to the rest. "Anyone else jump the gun?"

No one admitted it. Mrs. Wilkins said timidly, "I'm sorry, Doctor. Have they got another one? I'll be more careful."

Reynolds and Withers were seated in the officers' mess with coffee in front of them; the physicist paid no attention to his. His eyes glittered and his face twitched. "No limits! Calculations show over ninety per cent conversion of mass to energy.

You know what that means? If we assume — no, never mind. Just say that we could make every bomb the size of a pea. No tamper. No control circuits. Nothing but . . ." He paused. "Delivery would be fast, small jets — just a pilot, a weaponeer, and one of your 'operators'. No limit to the number of bombs. No nation on earth could —"

"Take it easy," said Reynolds. "We've got only a few telekinesis operators. You wouldn't risk them in a plane."

"But —"

"You don't need to. Show them the bombs, give them photos of the targets, hook them by radio to the weaponeer. That spreads them thin. And we'll test for more sensitive people. My figures show about one in eighteen hundred."

"Spread them thin," repeated Withers. "Mrs. Wilkins could handle dozens of bombs, one after another — couldn't she?"

"I suppose so. We'll test."

"We will indeed!" Withers noticed his coffee, gulped it. "Forgive me, Doctor; I'm punchy. I've had to revise too many opinions."

"I know. I was a behaviorist."

Captain Mikeler came in, looked around and came over. "The General wants you both," he said softly. "Hurry."

They were ushered into a guarded office. Major General Hanby was with General LaMott

and Vice Admiral Keithley; they looked grim. Hanby handed them message flimsies. Reynolds saw the stamp TOP SECRET and handed his back. "General, I'm not cleared for this."

"Shut up and read it."

Reynolds skipped the number groups: " — (PARAPHRASED) RUSSIAN EMBASSY TODAY HANDED STATE ULTIMATUM: DEMANDS USA CONVERT TO 'PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC' UNDER POLITICAL COMMISSARS TO BE ASSIGNED BY USSR. MILITARY ASSURANCES DEMANDED. NOTE CLAIMS MAJOR US CITIES (LIST SEPARATE) ARE MINED WITH ATOMIC BOMBS WHICH THEY THREATEN TO SET OFF BY RADIO IF TERMS ARE NOT MET BY SIXTEEN HUNDRED FRIDAY EST."

Reynolds reread it — "SIXTEEN HUNDRED FRIDAY" — two o'clock tomorrow afternoon, local time. Our cities booby-trapped with A-bombs? Could they do that? He realized that LaMott was speaking. "We must assume that the threat is real. Our free organization makes it an obvious line of attack."

The admiral said, "They may be bluffing."

The air general shook his head. "They know the President won't surrender. We can't assume that Ivan is stupid."

Reynolds wondered why he was being allowed to hear this. LaMott looked at him. "Admiral Keithley and I leave for Washington at once. I have delayed to ask you this: your people set off an atom bomb. *Can they keep bombs from going off?*"

Reynolds felt his time sense stretch as if he had all year to think about Grandma Wilkins, Norman, his other paranormals. "Yes," he answered.

LaMott stood up. "Your job, Hanby. Coming, Admiral?"

"Wait!" protested Reynolds. "Give me one bomb and Mrs. Wilkins — and I'll sit on it. But how many cities? Twenty? Thirty?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Thirty-eight bombs — or more. Where are they? What do they look like? How long will this go on? It's impossible."

"Of course — but do it anyhow. Or try. Hanby, tell them we're on our way, will you?"

"Certainly, General."

"Good-by, Doctor. Or so long, rather."

Reynolds suddenly realized that these two were going back to "sit" on one of the bombs, to continue their duties until it killed them. He said quickly, "We'll try. We'll certainly try."

Thirty-eight cities . . . forty-three hours . . . and seventeen adepts. Others were listed in

years of research, but they were scattered through forty-one states. In a dictatorship secret police would locate them at once, deliver them at supersonic speeds. But this was America.

Find them! Get them here! *Fast!* Hanby assigned Colonel Hammond to turn Reynolds' wishes into orders and directed his security officer to delegate his duties, get on the phone and use his acquaintance with the F.B.I., with other security officers, and through them with local police, to cut red tape and *find those paranormals*. Find them, convince them, bring pressure, start them winging toward the proving ground. By sundown, twenty-three had been found, eleven had been convinced or coerced, two had arrived. Hanby phoned Reynolds, caught him eating a sandwich standing up. "Hanby speaking. The President just phoned."

"The President?"

"LaMott got in to see him. He's dubious, but he's authorized an all-out try, short of slowing down conventional defense. One of his assistants left National Airport by jet plane half an hour ago to come here and help. Things will move faster."

But it did not speed things up, as the Russian broadcast was even then being beamed, making the crisis public; the President went on the air thirty minutes later. Reynolds did not hear him;

he was busy. Twenty people to save twenty cities — and a world. But how? He was sure that Mrs. Wilkins could smother any A-bomb she had seen; he hoped the others could. But a hidden bomb in a far-off city — find it mentally, think about it, quench it, not for the microsecond it took to set one off, but for the billions of micro-seconds it might take to uncover it — was it possible?

What would help? Certain drugs — caffeine, benzedrine. They must have quiet, too. He turned to Hammond. "I want a room and bath for each one."

"You've got that."

"No, we're doubled up, with semi-private baths."

Hammond shrugged. "Can do. It means booting out some brass."

"Keep the kitchen manned. They must not sleep, but they'll have to eat. Fresh coffee all the time and cokes and tea — anything they want. Can you put the room phones through a private switchboard?"

"Okay. What else?"

"I don't know. We'll talk to them."

They all knew of the Russian broadcast, but not what was being planned; they met his words with uneasy silence. Reynolds turned to Andrews. "Well, Two-Gun?"

"Big bite to chew, Prof."

"Yes. Can you chew it?"

"Have to, I reckon."

"Norman?"

"Gee, Boss! How can I when I can't see 'em?"

"Mrs. Wilkins couldn't see that bomb this morning. You can't see radioactivity on a watch dial; it's too small. You just see the dial and think about it. Well?"

The Negro lad scowled. "Think of a shiny ball in a city somewhere?"

"Yes. No, wait — Colonel Hammond, they need a visual image and it won't be that. There are atom bombs here — they must *see* one."

Hammond frowned. "An American bomb meant for dropping or firing won't look like a Russian bomb rigged for placement and radio triggering."

"What will they look like?"

"G-2 ought to know, I hope. We'll get some sort of picture. A three-dimensional mock-up, too. I'd better find Withers and the General." He left.

Mrs. Wilkins said briskly, "Doctor, I'll watch Washington, D. C."

"Yes, Mrs. Wilkins. You're the only one who has been tested, even in reverse. So you guard Washington; it's of prime importance."

"No, no, that's not why. It's the city I can *see* best."

Andrews said, "She's got something. Prof. I pick Seattle."

By midnight Reynolds had his charges, twenty-six by now,

tucked away in the officers' club. Hammond and he took turns at a switchboard rigged in the upper hall. The watch would not start until shortly before deadline. Fatigue reduced paranormal powers, sometimes to zero; Reynolds hoped that they were getting one last night of sleep.

A microphone had been installed in each room; a selector switch let them listen in. Reynolds disliked this but Hammond argued, "Sure, it's an invasion of privacy. So is being blown up by an A-bomb." He dialed the switch. "Hear that? Our boy Norman is sawing wood." He moved it again. "Private 'Two-Gun' is still stirring. We can't let them sleep, once it starts, so we have to spy on them."

"I suppose so."

Withers came upstairs. "Anything more you need?"

"I guess not," answered Reynolds. "How about the bomb mock-up?"

"Before morning."

"How authentic is it?"

"Hard to say. Their agents probably rigged firing circuits from radio parts bought right here; the circuits could vary a lot. But the business part — well, we're using real plutonium."

"Good. We'll show it to them after breakfast."

Two-Gun's door opened. "Howdy, Colonel. Prof — it's there."





"What is?"

"The bomb. Under Seattle. I can feel it."

"Where is it?"

"It's down—it *feels* down. And it feels wet, somehow. Would they put it in the Sound?"

Hammond jumped up. "In the harbor—and shower the city with radioactive water!" He was ringing as he spoke. "Get me General Hanby!"

"Morrison here," a voice answered. "What is it, Hammond?"

"The Seattle bomb—have them dredge for it. It's in the Sound, or somewhere under water."

"Eh? How do you know?"

"One of Reynolds' magicians. Do it!" He cut off.

Andrews said worriedly, "Prof, I can't see it—I'm not a 'seeing-eye.' Why don't you get one? Say that little Mrs. Brentano?"

"Oh, my God! Clairvoyants—we need them, too."

Withers said, "Eh, Doctor? Do you think—"

"No, I don't, or I would have thought of it. How do they search for bombs? What instruments?"

"Instruments? A bomb in its shielding doesn't even affect a Geiger counter. You have to open things and look."

"How long will that take? Say for New York!"

Hammond said, "Shut up! Reynolds, where are these clairvoyants?"

Reynolds chewed his lip "They're scarce."

"Scarcer than us dice rollers," added Two-Gun. "But get that Brentano kid. She found keys I had lost digging a ditch. Buried three feet deep—and me searching my quarters."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Brentano." Reynolds pulled out a notebook.

Hammond reached for the switchboard, "Morrison? Stand by for more names—and even more urgent than the others."

More urgent but harder to find; the Panic was on. The President urged everyone to keep cool and stay home, whereupon thirty million people stampeded. The ticker in the P.I.O. office typed the story: "NEW YORK NY — TO CLEAR JAM CAUSED BY WRECKS IN OUTBOUND TUBE THE INBOUND TUBE OF HOLLAND TUNNEL HAS BEEN REVERSED. POLICE HAVE STOPPED TRYING TO PREVENT EVACUATION. BULLDOZERS WORKING TO REOPEN TRIBOROUGH BRIDGE, BLADES SHOVING WRECKED CARS AND HUMAN HAMBURGER. WEE-HAWKEN FERRY DISASTER CONFIRMED: NO PASSENGER LIST YET—FLASH—GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE GAVE WAY AT 0353 EST, WHETHER FROM OVERLOAD OR SABOTAGE

NOT KNOWN. MORE MORE  
MORE — FLASH —

It was repeated everywhere. The Denver-Colorado Springs highway had one hundred thirty-five deaths by midnight, then reports stopped. A DC-6 at Burbank ploughed into a mob which had broken through the barrier. The Baltimore-Washington highway was clogged both ways; Memorial Bridge was out of service. The five outlets from Los Angeles were solid with creeping cars. At four a.m. EST the President declared martial law; the order had no immediate effect.

By morning Reynolds had thirty-one adepts assigned to twenty-four cities. He had a stomach-churning ordeal before deciding to let them work only cities known to them. The gambler, Even-Money Karsch, had settled it: "Doc, I know when I'm hot. Minneapolis has to be mine." Reynolds gave in, even though one of his students had just arrived from there; he put them both on it and prayed that at least one would be "hot". Two clairvoyants arrived; one, a blind newsdealer from Chicago, was put to searching there; the other, a carnice mentalist, was given the list and told to find bombs wherever she could. Mrs. Brentano had remarried and moved; Norfolk was being combed for her.

At one fifteen p.m., forty-five

minutes before deadline, they were in their rooms, each with maps and aerial views of his city, each with photos of the mocked-up bomb. The club was clear of residents; the few normals needed to coddle the paranormals kept careful quiet. Roads nearby were blocked; air traffic was warned away. Everything was turned toward providing an atmosphere in which forty-two people could sit still and *think*.

At the switchboard were Hammond, Reynolds, and Gordon McClintock, the President's assistant. Reynolds glanced up. "What time is it?"

"One thirty-seven," rasped Hammond. "Twenty-three minutes."

"One thirty-eight," disagreed McClintock. "Reynolds, how about Detroit? You can't leave it unguarded."

"Whom can I use? Each is guarding the city he knows best."

"Those twin girls—I heard them mention Detroit."

"They've played everywhere. But Pittsburgh is their home."

"Switch one of them to Detroit."

Reynolds thought of telling him to go to Detroit himself. "They work together. You want to get them upset and lose both cities?"

Instead of answering McClintock said, "And who's watching Cleveland?"

"Norman Johnson. He lives there and he's our second strongest operator."

They were interrupted by voices downstairs. A man came up, carrying a bag, and spotted Reynolds. "Oh, hello, Doctor. What is this? I'm on top priority work — tank production — when the F.B.I. grabs me. You are responsible?"

"Yes. Come with me." McClintock started to speak, but Reynolds led the man away. "Mr. Nelson, did you bring your family?"

"No, they're still in Detroit. Had I known —"

"Please! Listen carefully." He explained, pointed out a map of Detroit in the room to which they went, showed him pictures of the simulated bomb. "You understand?"

Nelson's jaw muscles were jumping. "It seems impossible."

"It is possible. You've got to think about that bomb — or bombs. Get in touch, squeeze them, keep them from going off. You'll have to stay awake."

Nelson breathed gustily. "I'll stay awake."

"That phone will get you anything you want. Good luck."

He passed the room occupied by the blind clairvoyant; the door was open. "Harry, it's Prof. Getting anything?"

The man turned to the voice.

"It's in the Loop. I could walk to it if I were there. A six-story building."

"That's the best you can do?"

"Tell them to try the attic. I get warm when I go up."

"Right away!" He rushed back, saw that Hanby had arrived. Swiftly he keyed the communications office. "Reynolds speaking. The Chicago bomb is in a six-story building in the Loop area, probably in the attic. No — that's all. G'by!"

Hanby started to speak; Reynolds shook his head and looked at his watch. Silently the General picked up the phone. "This is the commanding officer. Have any flash sent here." He put the phone down and stared at his watch.

For fifteen endless minutes they stood silent. The general broke it by taking the phone and saying, "Hanby. Anything?"

"No, General. Washington is on the wire."

"Eh? You say Washington?"

"Yes, sir. Here's the General, Mr. Secretary."

Hanby sighed. "Hanby speaking, Mr. Secretary. You're all right? Washington . . . is all right?"

They could hear the relayed voice. "Certainly, certainly. We're past the deadline. But I wanted to tell you: Radio Moscow is telling the world that our cities are in flames."

Hanby hesitated. "None of them are?"

"Certainly not. I've a talker hooked in to GHQ, which has an open line to every city listed. All safe. I don't know whether your freak people did any good but, one way or another, it was a fake —" The line went dead.

Hanby's face went dead with it. He jiggled the phone. "I've been cut off!"

"Not here, General — at the other end. Just a moment."

They waited. Presently the operator said, "Sorry, sir. I can't get them to answer."

"Keep trying!"

It was slightly over a minute — it merely seemed longer — when the operator said, "Here's your party, sir."

"That you, Hanby?" came the voice. "I suppose we'll have phone troubles just as we had last time. Now, about these ESP people: while we are grateful and all that, nevertheless I suggest that nothing be released to the papers. Might be misinterpreted."

"Oh. Is that an order, Mr. Secretary?"

"Oh, no, no! But have such things routed through my office."

"Yes, sir." He cradled the phone.

McClintock said, "You shouldn't have rung off, General. I'd like to know whether the Chief wants this business continued."

"Suppose we talk about it on

the way back to my office." The General urged him away, turned and gave Reynolds a solemn wink.

Trays were placed outside the doors at six o'clock; most of them sent for coffee during the evening. Mrs. Wilkins ordered tea; she kept her door open and chatted with anyone who passed. Harry the newsboy was searching Milwaukee; no answer had been received from his tip about Chicago. Mrs. Ekstein, or "Princess Cathay" as she was billed, had reported a "feeling" about a house trailer in Denver and was now poring over a map of New Orleans. With the passing of the deadline panic abated; communications were improving. The American people were telling each other that they had known that those damned commies were bluffing.

Hammond and Reynolds sent for more coffee at three a.m.; Reynolds' hand trembled as he poured. Hammond said, "You haven't slept for two nights. Get over on that divan."

"Neither have you."

"I'll sleep when you wake up."

"I *can't* sleep. I'm worrying about what'll happen when *they* get sleepy." He gestured at the line of doors.

"So am I."

At seven a.m. Two-Gun came out. "Prof, they got it. The bomb. It's gone. Like closing your hand on nothing."

Hammond grabbed the phone. "Get me Seattle — the F.B.I. office."

While they waited, Two-Gun said, "What now, Prof?"

Reynolds tried to think. "Maybe you should rest."

"Not until this is over. Who's got Toledo? I know that burg."

"Uh . . . young Barnes."

Hammond was connected; he identified himself, asked the question. He put the phone down gently. "They *did* get it," he whispered. "It was in the lake."

"I told you it was wet," agreed Two-Gun. "Now, about Toledo —"

"Well . . . tell me when you've got it and we'll let Barnes rest."

McClintock rushed in at seven thirty-five, followed by Hanby. "Doctor Reynolds! Colonel Hammond!"

"*Sh!* Quiet! You'll disturb them."

McClintock said in a lower voice, "Yes, surely — I was excited. This is important. They located a bomb in Seattle and —"

"Yes. Private Andrews told us."

"Hub? How did *he* know?"

"Never mind," Hanby intervened. "The point is, they found the bomb already triggered. Now we know that your people are protecting the cities."

"Was there any doubt?"

"Well . . . yes."

"But there isn't now," McClin-

tock added. "I must take over." He bent over the board. "Communications? Put that White House line through here."

"Just what," Reynolds said slowly, "do you mean by 'take over'?"

"Eh? Why, take charge on behalf of the President. Make sure these people don't let down an instant!"

"But what do you propose to do?"

Hanby said hastily, "Nothing. Doctor. We'll just keep in touch with Washington from here."

They continued the vigil together; Reynolds spent the time hating McClintock's guts. He started to take coffee, then decided on another benzedrine tablet instead. He hoped his people were taking enough of it — and not too much. They all had it, except Grandma Wilkins, who wouldn't touch it. He wanted to check with them but knew that he could not — each bomb was bound only by a thread of thought; a split-split second of diversion might be enough.

The outside light flashed; Hanby took the call. "Congress has recessed," he announced, "and the President is handing the Soviet Union a counter ultimatum; locate and disarm any bombs or be bombed in return." The light flashed again; Hanby answered. His face lit up. "Two more

found," he told them. "One in Chicago, right where your man said; the other in Camden."

"Camden? How?"

"They rounded up the known Communists, of course. This lad-die was brought back there for questioning. He didn't like that; he knew that he was being held less than a mile from the bomb. Who is on Camden?"

"Mr. Dimwiddy."

"The elderly man with the bunions?"

"That's right — retired post-man. General, do we assume that there is only one bomb per city?"

McClintock answered, "Of course not! These people must —"

Hanby cut in, "Central Intelligence is assuming so, except for New York and Washington. If they had more bombs here, they would have added more cities."

Reynolds left to take Dimwiddy off watch. McClintock, he fumed, did not realize that people were flesh and blood.

Dimwiddy was unsurprised. "A while ago the pressure let up, then — well, I'm afraid I dozed. I had a terrible feeling that I had let it go off, then I knew it hadn't." Reynolds told him to rest, then be ready to help out elsewhere. They settled on Philadelphia; Dimwiddy had once lived there.

The watch continued. Mrs. Ekstein came up with three hits, but no answers came back; Reynolds still had to keep those cities

covered. She then complained that her "sight" had gone; Reynolds went to her room and told her to nap, not wishing to consult McClintock.

Luncheon trays came and went. Reynolds continued worrying over how to arrange his operators to let them rest. Forty-three people and thirty-five cities — if only he had two for every city! Maybe any of them could watch any city? No, he could not chance it.

Barnes woke up and took back Toledo; that left Two-Gun free. Should he let him take Cleveland? Norman had had no relief and Two-Gun had once been through it, on a train. The colored boy was amazing but rather hysterical, whereas Two-Gun — well, Reynolds felt that Two-Gun would last, even through a week of no sleep.

No! He couldn't trust Cleveland to a man who had merely passed through it. But with Dimwiddy on Philadelphia, when Mary Gifford woke he could put her on Houston and that would let Hank sleep before shifting him to Indianapolis and that would let him —

A chess game, with all pawns queens and no mistakes allowed.

McClintock was twiddling the selector switch, listening in. Suddenly he snapped, "Someone is asleep!"

Reynolds checked the number.

"Of course, that's the twins' room; they take turns. You may hear snores in 21 and 30 and 8 and 19. It's okay; they're off watch."

"Well, all right." McClintock seemed annoyed.

Reynolds bent back to his list. Shortly McClintock snorted, "Who's in room 12?"

"Uh? Wait — that's Norman Johnson, Cleveland."

"You mean he's on watch?"

"Yes." Reynolds could hear the boy's asthmatic breathing, felt relieved.

"He's asleep!"

"No, he's not."

But McClintock was rushing down the corridor. Reynolds took after him; Hammond and Hanby followed. Reynolds caught up as McClintock burst into room 12. Norman was sprawled in a chair, eyes closed in his habitual attitude. McClintock rushed up, slapped him. "Wake up!"

Reynolds grabbed McClintock. "You bloody fool!"

Norman opened his eyes, then burst into tears. "It's gone!"

"Steady, Norman. It's all right."

"No, no! It's gone — and my mammy's gone with it!"

McClintock snapped, "Concentrate, boy! Get back on it!"

Reynolds turned on him. "Get out. Get out before I punch you."

Hanby and Hammond were in the door; the General cut in with

a hoarse whisper. "Pipe down Doctor, bring the boy."

Back at the board the outside light was flashing. Hanby took the call while Reynolds tried to quiet the boy. Hanby listened gravely, then said, "He's right. Cleveland just got it."

McClintock snapped, "He went to sleep. He ought to be shot."

"Shut up," said Hanby.

"But —"

Reynolds said, "Any others, General?"

"Why would there be?"

"All this racket. It may have disturbed a dozen of them."

"Oh, we'll see." He called Washington again. Presently he sighed. "No, just Cleveland. We were . . . lucky."

"General," McClintock insisted, "he was asleep."

Hanby looked at him. "Sir, you may be the President's deputy, but you yourself have no military authority. Off my post."

"But I am directed by the President to —"

"Off my post, sir! Go back to Washington. Or to Cleveland."

McClintock looked dumb-founded. Hanby added, "You're worse than bad — you're a fool."

"The President will hear of this."

"Blunder again and the President won't live that long. Get out."

By nightfall the situation was rapidly getting worse. Twenty-seven cities were still threatened

and Reynolds was losing operators faster than bombs were being found. Even-Money Karsch would not relieve when awakened. "See that?" he said, rolling dice. "Cold as a well-digger's feet. I'm through." After that Reynolds tested each one who was about to relieve, found that some were tired beyond the power of short sleep to restore them — they were "cold".

By midnight there were eighteen operators for nineteen cities. The twins he had fearfully split up; it had worked. Mrs. Wilkins was holding both Washington and Baltimore; she had taken Baltimore when he had no one to relieve there.

But now he had no one for relief anywhere and three operators — Nelson, Two-Gun and Grandma Wilkins — had had no rest. He was too fagged to worry; he simply knew that whenever one of them reached his limit, the United States would lose a city. The panic had resumed after the bombing of Cleveland; roads again were choked. The disorder made harder the search for bombs. But there was nothing he could do.

Mrs. Ekstein still complained about her sight but kept at it. Harry the newsboy had had no luck with Milwaukee, but there was no use shifting him; other cities were "dark" to him. During the night Mrs. Ekstein pointed to the bomb in Houston. It was, she

said, in a box underground. A coffin? Yes, there was a headstone; she was unable to read the name.

Thus, many recent dead in Houston were disturbed. But it was nine Sunday morning before Reynolds went to tell Mary Gifford that she could rest — or relieve for Wilmington, if she felt up to it. He found her collapsed and lifted her onto the bed, wondering if she had known the Houston bomb was found.

Eleven cities now and eight people. Grandma Wilkins held four cities. No one else had been able to double up. Reynolds thought dully that it was a miracle that they had been able to last at all; it surpassed enormously the best test performance.

Hammond looked up as he returned. "Make any changes?"

"No. The Gifford kid is through. We'll lose half a dozen cities before this is over."

"Some of them must be damn near empty by now."

"I hope so. Any more bombs found?"

"Not yet. How do you feel, Doc?"

"Three weeks dead." Reynolds sat down wearily. He was wondering if he should wake some of those sleeping and test them again when he heard a noise below; he went to the stairwell.

Up came an M.P. captain. "They said to bring her here."

*(Continued on page 161)*



IF THERE was one thing Dr. Kalmar hated, and there were many, it was having a new assistant fresh from a medical school on Earth. They always wanted to change things. They never realized that a planet develops its own techniques to meet its own requirements, which are seldom similar to those of any other world. Dr. Kalmar never got along with his assistants and he didn't expect to get along with this young Dr. Hoyt who was coming in on the transfer ship from Vega.

Dr. Kalmar had been trained on Earth himself, of course, but he wistfully remembered how he had revered Dr. Lowell when he had been Lowell's assistant. He'd known that his own green learning was no match for Dr. Lowell's wisdom and experience after 30 years on Deneb, and he had avidly accepted his lessons.

Why, he grumbled to himself on his way to the spaceport to meet the unknown whippersnapper, why didn't Earth turn out young doctors the way it used to? They ought to have the arrogance knocked out of them before they left medical school. That's what must have happened to him, because his attitude had certainly been humble when he landed.

The spaceport was jammed, naturally. Ship arrivals were infrequent enough to bring everybody from all over the planet who



*"Wanta know what's wrong with women these days? Spoiled! The whole kit and kaboodle of 'em. They want to sing in nightclubs and hook up with some millionaire and wear beautiful clothes. Housework is something for gadgets to take care of, with maids to run the gadgets. Afraid to get a few calluses on their dainty hands!"*

*"We got a way to handle that on Deneb. A girl gets highfalutin up there, the Doc puts her in the Ego Alter room. Thicken up her ankles a little, take some of the sparkle out of her eyes and hair, and you get a woman fit to pull a plow!"*

*Hold it, Madam! H. L. Gold said that; not us. Personally, we like girls — not Percherons!*

# No Charge For Alterations

By H. L. GOLD



Illustrator: H. Sharp

was not on duty at the farms, mines, factories, freight and passenger jets and all the rest of the busy activities of this comparatively new colony. They brought their lunches and families and stood around to watch. Dr. Kalmar went to the platform.

The ship sat down on a mushroom of fire that swiftly became a flaming pancake and then was squashed out of existence.

"I'm waiting for a shipment of livestock," enthused the man standing next to Dr. Kalmar.

"You're lucky," the doctor said. "They can't talk back."

The man looked at him sympathetically. "Meeting a female?"

"Gabbier and more annoying," said Dr. Kalmar, but he didn't elaborate and the man, with the courtesy of the frontier, did not pry for an explanation.

Livestock and freight came down on one elevator and passengers came down another. Slide-walks carried the cargo to Sterilization and travelers to the greeting platform. Dr. Kalmar felt his shoulders droop. The man with the medical bag had to be Dr. Hoyt and he was even more brisk, erect and muscular than Dr. Kalmar had expected, with a superior and inquisitive look that made the last assistant, unbearable as he'd been, seem as tractable as one of the arriving cows.

Dr. Hoyt spotted him instantly and came striding over to grab

his hand in a grip like an ore-crusher. "You're Dr. Kalmar. Glad to know you. I'm sure we'll get along fine together. Miserable trip. Had to change ships four times to get here. Hope the food's better than shipboard slop. Got a nice hospital to work in? Do I live in or out?"

Dr. Kalmar was grudgingly forced to say rapidly, "Right. Likewise, I hope so. Too bad. Suits us, I think so. In."

He got Dr. Hoyt into a jetcab and told the driver to make time back to the hospital. Appointments were piling up while he had to make the courtesy trip out to the spaceport, which was another nuisance. Now he'd have all of those and a talkative assistant who'd want to know the reasons for everything.

"Pretty barren," said Dr. Hoyt, looking out the window at the vegetationless ground below. "Why's that?"

He'd known he was going to Deneb, Dr. Kalmar thought angrily. The least he could have done was read up on the place. *He* had.

"It's an Earth-type planet," Dr. Kalmar said in a blunt voice, "except that life never developed on it. We had to bring everything — benign germ cultures, seed, animals, fish, insects — a whole ecology. Our farms are close to the cities. Too wasteful of freight to move them out very far. Another

few centuries and we'll have a *real* population, millions of people instead of the 20,000 we have now in a couple of dozen settlements around this world. Then we'll have the whole place a nice shade of green."

"City boy myself," said Dr. Hoyt. "Hate the country. Hydroponics and synthetic meat—that's the answer."

"For Earth. It'll be a long time before we get that crowded here on Deneb."

"Deneb," the young doctor repeated, dissatisfied. "That's the name of the star. You mean to tell me the planet has the same name?"

"Most solar systems have only one Earth-type planet. It saves a lot of trouble to just call that planet Deneb, Vega or whatever."

"Is *that* clutch of shacks the city?" exclaimed Dr. Hoyt.

"Denebia," said Dr. Kalmar, beginning to enjoy himself finally.

"Why, you could lose it in a suburb or Bosyorkdelphia!"

"That monstrosity that used to be New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts? I wouldn't want to."

He was pleased when Dr. Hoyt sank into stunned silence. If luck was with him, that stupefaction might last the whole day. It seemed as though it might, for the sight of the modest little hospital was too much for the youngster who had just come from the mam-

moth health factories of Earth.

Dr. Hoyt revived somewhat when he saw the patients waiting in the scantily furnished outer room, but Dr. Kalmar said, "Better get yourself settled," and opened a door for his immature colleague.

"But there's only one bed in this room," Dr. Hoyt objected. "You must have made a mistake."

Dr. Kalmar, recalling the crowded cubicles of Earth, gave out a proud little dry laugh. "You're on Deneb now, boy. Here you'll have to get used to spaciousness. We like elbow room."

The young doctor went in hesitantly, leaving the door open for a fast escape in case an error had been made. Dr. Kalmar had done the same when he'd arrived nine years ago. Judging by his own experience, it would take Dr. Hoyt a full six months to get used to having a room all to himself. There would be plenty of time to start showing him the ropes tomorrow, and in the meantime there were the backed-up appointments to be taken care of.

Dr. Kalmar went to his office and had his nurse, Miss Dupont, send in the first patient.

It was a girl of 17, Avis Emery, who had been brought by her parents. She sat sullenly, dark-haired, too daintily pretty and delicately shapely for a frontier world like this, while Mr. Emery put the file from Social Control on the doctor's desk.

"We're farmers —" the man began.

Dr. Kalmar interrupted, "The information is in the summary. Avis is to be assigned her mate next year, but she wants to go to Earth and become a nightclub singer. She refuses to marry a boy who'd be able to help around the farm, and she won't work on it herself."

He looked up severely at the parents. "This is your own fault, you know. You pampered her. Farm labor is too valuable for pampering. We can't afford it."

"You can blame me, Doc," said Mr. Emery miserably. "She's such a pretty little thing — I couldn't work her the way Sue and I work ourselves."

"And then she started getting notions," Mrs. Emery added, giving her husband a vicious glare. Dr. Kalmar could imagine the nights of argument and accusation before they were at last forced to go for medical help to solve their self-created problem. "Singing in nightclubs back on Earth, marrying a billionaire, living in a sky yacht!"

"Avis," said Dr. Kalmar gently. "You know it's not that easy, don't you? There are lots and lots of pretty girls on Earth and very few billionaires. If you did get a job singing in a nightclub, you know you'd have to do some unpleasant things because there's so much competition for customers.

Things like stripteasing, drinking at the tables and going out with whoever the owner tells you to."

The girl's face grew animated for the first time. "Well, sure! Why do you think I want to go?"

"And you don't love Deneb and your farm?"

"I hate both of them!"

"But you realize that we must have food. Doesn't it make you feel important to grow more food so we can increase our population?"

"No! Why should I care? I want to go to Earth!"

Dr. Kalmar shook his head regretfully. He pushed a button on his desk. It was connected to a gravity generator directly under the girl's chair. Four gravities suddenly pushed her down into it and a hypodermic needle jabbed her swiftly with a hypnotic drug. She slumped. He released the button and the artificial gravity abated, but she remained dazed and relaxed.

"You're not going to hurt her, are you, Doc?" Mr. Emery begged.

"Certainly not. But I suppose you know Social Control's orders."

They nodded, the husband gloomily, the wife with a single sharp jerk of her head.

"You go right ahead and do it," she said. "I'm sick of working my fingers to the bone while she primps and preens and talks all the time about going to Earth."

"Come, Avis," Dr. Kalmar said in a low, commanding voice.

She stood up, blank-faced, and followed him out to the Ego Alter room. He closed the door, sat her down in the insulated seat next to the control console, put the wired plastic helmet on her and adjusted it to fit her skull snugly.

Running his finger down the treatment sheet of her Social Control file, he set the dials according to its instructions. The psychic areas to be reduced were sex drive, competitiveness and imagination, while the areas of reproductive urge and cooperation were to be intensified. He regulated the individual timers and sent the varying charge through her brain.

There was no reaction, no convulsion, no distortion of features. She sat there as if nothing had happened, but her personality had changed as completely as though she had been retrained from birth.

Miss Dupont came in without knocking. She knew, of course, that any patient in the Ego Alter room would be incapable of being disturbed.

"Rephysical, Dr. Kalmar?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so. Will you prepare her, please?"

The nurse removed the girl's clothes. There was no resistance.

"Such a lovely body," she said. "It's a shame."

He shrugged. "Until we have enough people and farms and in-

dustries, Miss Dupont, we'll just have to get used to altering people to fit the needs of our society. I'm sure you understand that."

"Yes, but it still seems a shame. Bodies like that don't grow on trees."

He gently moved the girl into the Rephysical Chamber. "They grow in this machine, though. As soon as we can afford it, which ought to be only a few hundred years from now, we can make any woman look like this, or even better."

"And don't forget the men," Miss Dupont said as he started the mitogenetic generator. "We could use some Adonises around here."

"We'll have them," he assured her.

"Somebody will. None of us'll live that long."

Working like a sculptor with a cathode in one hand and an anode in the other, Dr. Kalmar began reshaping the girl who stood fixedly in the boxlike chamber. The flesh fled from the cathode and chased after the anode as he broadened the fine nose, thickened the mobile lips, squared the slender jaw and drew out carefully the delicately arched orbital ridges.

"I'll leave the curl in her hair," he said. "Every woman needs at least one feature she can be proud of."

"You're telling me," Miss Dupont replied.

"Synthetic tissue, please."

She drew out a tube with a variable nozzle and started working just ahead of him. A spray of high-velocity cells shot through the girl's smooth skin at the neck, shoulders, breasts, hips and legs, forming shapeless lumps that he guided into cords and muscles. The slim figure quickly broadened, grew brawny and competent-looking, the body of a woman who could breed phenomenally while farming alongside her man.

Dr. Kalmar racked up the instruments and helped Miss Dupont dress the girl in coveralls and sandals. He felt the pride of craftsmanship when he found that the clothing supplied for her by Social Control exactly fitted her. He injected an antidote to the hypnotic and gave her the standard test for emotional response as her expressionless face cleared to placidity.

"Do you know where you are, Avis?"

"Yes. Ego Alter and Rephysical."

"What have we done to you?"

"Changed me to fit my environment."

"Do you resent being changed?"

"No." She paused and looked worried. "Who's taking care of the crops while I'm here?"

"They can wait till you and your parents get back, Avis. Let's show them the change, shall we?"

"All right," she said. "I think they'll be proud of me. This is how they always wanted me to be."

"And you?"

"Oh, I feel much better. As if I don't have to try so hard."

"I'm glad, Avis. Miss Dupont, better have a sedative ready when her father sees her. I think he'll need it."

"And her mother?" asked the nurse practically.

"She'll probably want a drink to celebrate. Give her one."

Dr. Kalmar's prognosis was correct, only it didn't go far enough. His young assistant from Earth had come scooting out of his disquietingly large quarters and was jittering in the office when they entered.

"Is that the pretty girl who was waiting when we came in?" he yelped in outrage. "What have you done to her?"

Dr. Kalmar gave the sedative to him instead of Mr. Emery, who was shocked, but had known in advance what to expect. Miss Dupont prepared another sedative quickly, gave Mrs. Emery a celebration drink and moved the family toward the door.

"She looks fine, Doctor," the mother said happily. "Avis ought to be a big help around the house and farm from now on."

"I'm sure she will," he said.

"But she was so lovely!" wept Mr. Emery, though in a rapidly

becalming voice as the sedative took effect.

The door closed behind them.

"You ought to be reported to the Medical Association back on Earth!" Dr. Hoyt said angrily. "Ruining a girl's looks like that!"

Dr. Kalmar sighed. He had hoped to be able to put off this orientation lecture until the following day, when there wouldn't be so many patients jamming his appointment book.

"All right, let's get it over with. First, I was also trained on Earth and know how Ego Alter and Re-physical are used there: Ego Alter to remove psychic blocks so people can compete better, and Rephysical so they'll be more attractive. Second, we're not under the jurisdiction of Earth's Medical Association. Third, we'd damn well better not be, because our problems and solutions aren't the same at all."

"You'd have been jailed for spoiling that girl's chances of a good marriage!"

"I didn't," Dr. Kalmar said quietly. "I improved them."

"You did nothing of the —" Dr. Hoyt stopped. "Improved? How?"

"I keep telling you this is a frontier world and you keep acting as if you understand, but you don't. Look, a family is an economic liability on Earth; it consumes without producing. That's why girls have so much trouble

finding husbands there. Out here it's different. A family is an asset — if every member in it is willing to work."

"But a pretty girl like that can always get by."

"No Denebian can afford to marry a pretty girl. It's too risky. She can't work as hard as we do and still take care of her looks. And he'd worry about her constantly, which would cut into his efficiency. By having me make her a merely attractive girl in a wholesome, hearty way, Social Control guarantees more than just a marriage for her — it guarantees a contented married life."

"Sweating away on a farm," Dr. Hoyt said.

"Now that her anti-social strivings are gone, she'll realize that Deneb needs farmers instead of nightclub singers. She'll take pride in being a good worker, she'll raise as many children as she'll be capable of bearing, and she'll have a good husband and a prosperous farm. That wouldn't have satisfied her before. It will now. And she's better for it and so is Deneb."

Dr. Hoyt shook his head. "It's all upside down."

"You'll get used to it. Why not take today off and explore Denebia? You need a rest after all those months in space."

"Maybe I will," said Dr. Hoyt vaguely, slightly anesthetized.

"Good." Dr. Kalmar buzzed



for Miss Dupont. "Send in the next patient, please. Oh, and Dr. Hoyt is taking the day off."

But the young assistant was stunned into staying by the huge size of the Social Control file that was carried by the next patient, Mr. Fallon, and his wife.

"I know just what you're thinking, Dr. Kalmar!" cried Mrs. Fallon distractedly, but with a nervously bright smile. "Those awful Fallons again! I don't blame you a bit, but —"

As a matter of fact, that was exactly what Dr. Kalmar was thinking, plus the defeated feeling that they were all he needed to make the day complete.

"Good Lord, what's in all those files?" Dr. Hoyt exclaimed.

Dr. Kalmar could have explained, but he didn't feel up to it.

Mr. Fallon, a wispy, shyly affable, poetic-looking chap, did it for him. "Papers," he said.

"I know that, but why so many?" Dr. Hoyt asked impatiently.

Miss Dupont seemed wryly amused as she watched his consternation.

"I guess you might say it's because I can't make my mind up," confessed Mrs. Fallon with an uneasy giggle. She was a big woman who might have gurgled over a collection of toy dogs on Earth, but here she was a freight checker and her husband was a

statistician in the Department of Supply, though on Earth he might have been anything from a composer to a social worker. "No matter how often we rephysical Harry, I always get tired of his looks in a few months."

"And how often has that been done?" Dr. Hoyt demanded.

"I think it's eleven times. Isn't that right, dear?"

"No, sweet," said Mr. Fallon. "Thirteen."

Dr. Kalmar could have interrupted, but he considered it wiser to let his assistant learn the hard way. Miss Dupont was enjoying it too much to interfere.

"We've made him tall and we've made him short, skinny, fat, bulging with muscle, red hair, black hair, blond hair, gray hair — I don't know, just about everything in the book," said Mrs. Fallon, "and I simply can't seem to find one I'd like for keeps."

"Then why the devil don't you get another husband?"

Mrs. Fallon looked shocked. "Why, he was assigned to me!"

"Dr. Hoyt just came from Earth," Dr. Kalmar cut in at last, before a brawl could start. "He's not familiar with our methods."

"Let's hear the cockeyed reason," Dr. Hoyt said resignedly.

"We keep our population balanced," said Dr. Kalmar. "Too many of either sex creates tension, hostility, loss of efficiency; look at Earth if you want proof. We can't

risk even a little of that, so we use prenatal sex control to keep them exactly equal."

"There's a wife for every man," Mr. Fallon put in genially, "and a husband for every woman. Works out fine."

"With no surplus," Dr. Kalmar added. "There are no floaters to allow the kind of marital moving day you have on Earth, where so many just up and shift over to new mates. We get ours for life. That's where Ego Alter and Rephysical come in."

"You mean people bring in their mates to have them done over?"

"If they're not satisfied and if the mates agree to be changed."

"I don't mind," said Mr. Fallon virtuously. "I figure Mabel will decide what she wants one of these changes, and then we can settle down and be happy with each other."

"But what about you?" asked Dr. Hoyt, bewildered. "Don't you want her changed?"

"Oh, no. I like her fine just as she is."

"You see now how it works?" Dr. Kalmar asked. "We can't have a variety of mates, but we can have all the variety we want in one mate. It comes to the same thing, as far as I can see, and causes much less confusion, especially since we need stable relationships."

Dr. Hoyt was striving heroic-

ally to stay indignant in spite of the sedative. "And do many ask to have their mates changed?"

"I guess we're a sort of record, aren't we?" Mr. Fallon boasted.

"I guess you are," agreed Dr. Kalmar. "And now, Dr. Hoyt, if there aren't any more questions, I'd like to proceed with this couple."

Dr. Hoyt stretched his eyes wide to keep them open. "It's all screwy to me, but it's none of my business. As soon as I finish my internship, I'm heading back to Earth, where things make sense, so I don't have to understand this mishmash you call a planet. Need help?"

"If you'd find out what Mrs. Fallon has in mind this time, it would let me run the patients through a lot faster."

"How would they feel about it?" Dr. Hoyt asked.

"It's all right with me," Mr. Fallon said amiably. "I'm pretty used to this, you know."

"But what are we going to make you look like, Harry?" his wife fretted. "I felt very jealous of other women when you were handsome and I didn't like you just ordinary-looking."

"Why not go through the model book with Dr. Hoyt?" suggested Dr. Kalmar. "There are still some types you haven't tried."

"There *are*?" she asked in gratified astonishment. "Would

you mind very much, Dr. Hoyt?"

"Glad to," he said.

Miss Dupont brought out the model book for him, and he and Mrs. Fallon studied the facial and physical types that were very explicitly illustrated there in three-dimensional full color. Mr. Fallon, contentedly working out math problems on a sheet of paper, left the choice entirely to her.

Meanwhile, Dr. Kalmar and Miss Dupont swiftly took care of a succession of other patients, raising the tolerance level of frustration in a watchmaker, replating the acne-pitted skin of a sensitive youth, restoring a finger lost in a machine-shop accident, and building up good-natured aggression in an ore miner whose productivity had slumped.

Mrs. Fallon still hadn't decided when the last patient had been taken care of. She said unhappily, "I don't know. I simply absolutely don't know. Couldn't you suggest *something*, Dr. Hoyt?"

"Wouldn't be ethical," he told her bluntly. "Not allowed to."

Dr. Kalmar, checking the Social Control papers with Miss Dupont, wondered if he should interfere. It would lower confidence in Dr. Hoyt, which meant that people would insist on Dr. Kalmar's treating them. Then, instead of having an assistant to remove some of the load, he'd have to do the work of two men.

He decided to let the young doctor handle it.

But Dr. Hoyt stood up in exasperation, slammed the book shut, and said, "Mrs. Fallon, if you know what you want, I'll be glad to oblige. But I'm not a telepathy —"

"Is there anything I can do?" Dr. Kalmar interrupted quickly, before his assistant could create any more damage.

"He doesn't have to get huffy," Mrs. Fallon said indignantly. "All I asked for was a suggestion or two."

"Insult my wife, will he?" Mr. Fallon belligerently added.

"It's my fault," Dr. Kalmar said. "Dr. Hoyt just got in today from Earth and he's tired and he naturally doesn't understand all our ways yet —"

"Yet?" Dr. Hoyt repeated in disgust. "What makes you think I'll ever —"

"And I shouldn't have burdened him with this problem until he's had a chance to rest up and look around," Dr. Kalmar continued in a slightly louder voice. "Now, let's see if we can't settle this problem before closing time, eh?"

The Fallons subsided, Dr. Hoyt watched with a sarcastic eye, though he kept silent as Dr. Kalmar and Miss Dupont, working as a shrewd team, gave them the suggestion they had been looking



for. It was all done very smoothly, so smoothly that Dr. Kalmar felt professional pride because even his stiff-necked assistant was unable to detect the fact that it was a suggestion.

Dr. Kalmar got Mrs. Fallon to reminisce about the alterations her husband had undergone, and Miss Dupont promptly agreed with her when she explained why each had been unsatisfactory. It took some time, but he eventually brought her back to what Mr. Fallon had looked like when she'd first married him.

"Now, isn't that the strangest thing?" she said, puzzled. "I can't remember. Can you, dear?"

"It's a little mixed up," Mr. Fallon admitted. "Let's see, I know I was taller and I think I had a long, thin face —"

"Oh, we don't have to guess," Dr. Kalmar said. "Nurse, we have the information on file, don't we?"

"Yes, Doctor," she said, and instantly produced a photograph. They evidently thought it was merely filing efficiency; they hadn't noticed her searching for the picture quietly while Dr. Kalmar had been leading them on. He had, in fact, delayed asking her until she'd nodded to indicate that she had found it.

Mr. Fallon frowned as if he'd recognized the face but couldn't remember the name. His wife gave a little shriek of admiration.

"Why, Harry, you looked perfectly wonderful!"

"Those deep dimples made shaving pretty hard," he recalled.

"But they're *darling*! Why did you ever let me change you?"

"Because I wanted you to be happy, sweet."

It was as simple as that — a bit of practical psychology based on knowledge of the patients. Dr. Kalmar wished wistfully that old Dr. Lowell had been there to observe. He would have approved, which might have made up for Dr. Hoyt's unpleasant expression.

"I hope this is the one you want," Dr. Kalmar said as he took them to the front door after the rephysical.

"Goodness, I hope so!" Mrs. Fallon exclaimed. She looked fondly at her husband, and this time had to look up to see his face. "I'm almost *positive* this is what I want Harry to be."

"Well, if it isn't, sweet," Mr. Fallon said, "we'll try something else. I don't mind as long as it makes you happy."

They closed the door behind them, leaving the hospital empty of all but the small staff.

"They're crazy!" Dr. Hoyt exploded. "He's not the one we should be changing. That idiotic female needs a good Ego Alter!"

"He hasn't asked for it," Dr. Kalmar pointed out patiently.

"Then he ought to!"

"That's his decision, isn't it?"

There's such a thing as ethics, you know."

"I've never seen anything more insane than the way you work," snapped Dr. Hoyt. "I can't wait to finish my stretch here and go home."

He stamped out, weaving slightly because of the sedative.

"Well, what do you think of our assistant?" asked Dr. Kalmar.

"He's cute," Miss Dupont said irrationally.

Dr. Kalmar glowered at her. He'd forgotten that she was due to have a mate assigned to her this year.

Routine at the hospital was anything but routine. Dr. Hoyt barely kept from yelping each time someone was treated, and his help was given so unwillingly that Dr. Kalmar, sweating under a double load and with Dr. Hoyt to argue with at the same time, was all for putting him on the ship and asking Earth for another intern. But Miss Dupont talked him out of it.

For no discernible reason other than loneliness, Dr. Hoyt was taking her out. She was pleased, even though he crabbed constantly about the shabby-looking clothes she wore, which were typical of Deneb, and the way they fitted her.

Either the two of them didn't talk shop, or she had no influence with him — his criticism and im-

patience grew sharper each week.

It bothered Dr. Kalmar more than he thought it should, and much more than Mrs. Kalmar wanted it to. She was a pleasant little woman who liked things as they were, which was why Dr. Kalmar had hesitated all this while to ask her to undergo a slight rephysical; he would have preferred her a little taller, more filled out, her slight wrinkles deleted and, while he was thinking about it, he wished she'd let him give her space-black hair instead of her indeterminately blondish mop. But he'd rather have her as she was than peevish, so he had never mentioned it.

"Don't let the boy upset you, she said. "It's only that he's so young and inexperienced. You can't expect him to adjust quickly to a new environment and a whole new medical orientation."

"But that's just what annoys me! Why, I used to hang onto every word of Dr. Lowell's when I came here! I never thought I knew better than he did."

"Well, dear, you're you and Dr. Lowell is Dr. Lowell and Dr. Hoyt is Dr. Hoyt."

He tried to think of an answer and couldn't. "I suppose so."

"Maybe you'd feel better if you spoke to Dr. Lowell about it."

"What could he do? This is really an internal problem that I should work out with Dr. Hoyt. I can't involve Dr. Lowell in it."

But it became intolerable when there was a young girl who wanted to be a boy and Dr. Kalmar and Dr. Hoyt got into the worst battle yet. Naturally, she had to be given an Ego Alter to make her happy about being a girl, whereas Dr. Hoyt argued that she should be allowed to be a boy if that was what she wanted. Dr. Kalmar explained angrily once more than the sexes were exactly balanced and Dr. Hoyt quoted the rule of personal choice. It was applicable on Earth, but not on Deneb, Dr. Kalmar retorted, to which Dr. Hoyt snorted something about playing God.

Dr. Kalmar confessed harshly to his wife that she was right. He had to bring old Dr. Lowell into the situation; it was out of Dr. Kalmar's control and was keeping the hospital in a turmoil. It was time for Dr. Lowell to inspect the hospital, the job he had taken in place of actual retirement. Dr. Kalmar needed help from Miss Dupont to bring the problem out into the open. But she became unexpectedly obstinate.

"I won't hurt Leo's career," she explained flatly.

Dr. Kalmar gave her a vacant look. "Leo?"

She blushed. "Dr. Hoyt. He's honestly trying to understand, but he finds it so different from Earth. Practically everything we do here is in reverse."

"But so is our environment, Miss Dupont. Earth is overcrowded and Deneb is underpopulated, so of course our methods would be the opposite of Earth's. He has to be made to see that we must solve our problems our own way."

She studied his face suspiciously. "That's all you want?"

"Certainly. Damn it, do you think I want him fired and sent back to Earth before his internship's up? I know it would hurt his record. Besides, I need an assistant — but not one I have to bicker with every time I make a move."

"Well, in that case —"

"Good girl. All you have to do is help me hold off the cases he'd argue about until Dr. Lowell gets here." He stared down glumly at his hands, which were gripping each other tightly. "God knows I'm no diplomat. Dr. Lowell is. He convinced me easily enough when I came here. Maybe he can do the same with Dr. Hoyt."

"Oh, I hope he can," Miss Dupont said earnestly. "I want so much to have you and Leo work together in harmony."

He glanced up, curious. "Why?"

"Because I'm in love with him."

He found himself nodding bitterly. Having Dr. Hoyt go back to Earth wouldn't be a fraction as bad as Miss Dupont leaving with

him. So now there was something else to worry about.

Dr. Lowell came bouncing out of the jetcab a few days later. "The hospital better be spotless!" he called out jovially, paying off the hackie. "I'm in a mean mood. Liable to suspend everybody."

There was a strange lift to Dr. Kalmar's spirits as the old man entered the office. He wished without hope that he could inspire the same sort of reverence and respect. Impossible, of course. Dr. Lowell was great; he himself was nothing more than competent.

Dr. Kalmar introduced his young assistant to the old man.

"Young and strong," Dr. Lowell approved. "That's what we need on Deneb. Skill is important, but health and youth even more so."

"For those who stay," said Dr. Hoyt frostily. "I'm not."

Dr. Kalmar felt himself quiver with rage. The wet-nosed pup couldn't talk to Dr. Lowell like that!

But Dr. Lowell was saying cheerily, "You seem to have made up your mind to go back. No matter. Some decisions are like eggshells — made only to be broken. I hope that's what you'll do with yours."

"Not a chance," Dr. Hoyt said. He didn't take the arrogant expression off his face even when

Miss Dupont looked at him pleadingly.

"Then I say let's signal the next ship —" Dr. Kalmar began.

Dr. Lowell cut in quickly, "You two have patients to attend to, I see. Don't worry about me. I know my way around this poor little wretch of a building. Not much like Earth hospitals, is it?" He headed for the medical supply room, adding just before he went in, "A lot can be said for small installations. The personal touch, you know."

Dr. Kalmar enviously realized how deftly the old man had put the youngster in his place, whereas he would have stood there and slugged it out verbally. Lord, if he could only acquire that awesome wisdom!

"Well, back to work," he said, trying to imitate the cheeriness at least.

"Sure, let's ruin some more lives," Dr. Hoyt almost snarled.

"Leo, *please!*" whispered Miss Dupont imploringly.

Five minutes later the two doctors were furiously arguing over a very old man who had been sent by Social Control to have his eyesight strengthened.

"You have no right to let anybody dodder around like this!" Dr. Hoyt yelled. "What in hell is Rephysical for if not for such cases?"

"You probably think we ought to make him look like 25 again,"



Dr. Kalmar yelled back. "If that's all you've learned working here —"

"Now, now," said Dr. Lowell soothingly. He'd come in unnoticed by either of the men. "Dr. Hoyt is right, of course. We would like to make old people young and some day we'll be able to afford it. But not for some time to come."

"Why not?" Dr. Hoyt demanded in a lower tone, visibly flattered by Dr. Lowell's seemingly taking his side.

"Rephysical can't actually make anyone young. It can only give the outward appearance of youth and replace obviously diseased parts. But an old body is an old organism; it has to break down eventually. If we give it more vigor than it can endure, it breaks down too soon, much sooner than if we let it age normally. That represents economic loss as well as a humanitarian one."

"I don't follow you," Dr. Hoyt said bewilderedly.

"Well, our patient used to be a machinist. A good one. Now he's only able to be an oiler. A good one, too, when you improve his eyesight. He can go on doing that for years, performing a useful function. But he'd wear himself out in no time as a machinist again if you de-aged him."

"Is that supposed to make sense?"

"It does," said Dr. Lowell, "for Dench."

Dr. Hoyt wanted to continue the discussion, but Dr. Lowell was already on his way to inspect another part of the hospital. Grumbling, the young man helped chart the optical nerves that had to be replaced and measure the new curve of the retinas ordered by Social Control.

But he fought just as strenuously over other cases, especially a retired freight-jet pilot who had to have his reflexes slowed down so he could become a contented meteorologist. Whenever there was a loud disagreement of this sort, Dr. Lowell was there to mediate calmly.

At the end of the day, Dr. Kalmar was emotionally exhausted. He said as he and Dr. Lowell were washing up, "The kid's hopeless. I thought you could straighten him out — God knows I couldn't — but he'll never see why we have to work the way we do."

"What do you suggest?" Dr. Lowell asked through a towel.

"Send him back to Earth. Get an intern who's more malleable."

Dr. Lowell tossed the towel into the sterilizer. "Can't be done. We're expanding so fast all over the Galaxy that Earth can't train and ship out enough doctors for the new colonies. If we sent him back, I don't know when we'd get another."

Dr. Kalmar swallowed. "You mean it's him or nobody?"

"Afraid so."

"But he'll never fit in on Deneb!"

"You did," Dr. Lowell said.

Dr. Kalmar tried to smile modestly. "I realized immediately how little I knew and how much more experience you had. I was willing to learn. Why, I used to listen to you and watch you work and try to see your reasons for doing things —"

"You think so?" asked Dr. Lowell.

Dr. Kalmar glanced at him in astonishment. "You know I did. I still do, for that matter."

"When you landed on Deneb," said Dr. Lowell, "you were the most stubborn, opinionated young ass I'd ever met."

Dr. Kalmar's smile became an appreciative grin. "Damn, I wish I had that light touch of yours!"

"You were so dogmatic and argumentative that Dr. Hoyt is a suggestible schoolboy in comparison."

"Well, you don't have to go that far," Dr. Kalmar said. "I get what you're driving at — every intern needs orientation and I should be more patient and understanding."

"Then you don't follow me at all," stated Dr. Lowell. "Invite Dr. Hoyt, Miss Dupont and me to your house for dinner tonight and maybe you'll get a better idea of what I mean."

"Anything for a free meal, eh?"

"And to keep a doctor here on Deneb that we'd lose otherwise."

"Implying that I can't do it."

"Isn't that the decision you'd come to?"

"Yes, I guess it is," Dr. Kalmar confessed. "All right, how about dinner at my house tonight? I'll round up the other two and call Harriet so she'll expect us."

"Delighted to come," said Dr. Lowell. "Nice of you to ask me."

Miss Dupont was elated at the invitation and Dr. Hoyt said he had nothing else to do anyway. On the videophone Mrs. Kalmar was dismayed for a moment, until Dr. Lowell told her to put through an emergency order to Central Commissary and he'd verify it.

That was when Dr. Kalmar realized how serious the old man was. On a raw planet where crises were everyday routine, a situation had to be catastrophic before it could be called an emergency.

Dinner on Deneb was the same as anywhere else in the Galaxy. To free women for other work, food was delivered weekly in cooked form. A special messenger from Central Commissary had brought the emergency rations and Mrs. Kalmar had simply punctured the self-heat cartridges and put the servings in front of each guest; the containers were

disposable plates and came with single-use plastic utensils. No garbage, no preparation, no cleaning up afterward, except to toss them all into the converter furnace. Dr. Hoyt was still not accustomed to wholly grown foods; he'd been raised on synthetics, of course, which were the staples on Earth.

"Well, that was good," said Dr. Lowell, getting up from the table with his round little belly comfortably expanded. "Now, let's have a few drinks before we start a professional bull session. Where do you keep your liquor? I'd like to mix my special so Dr. Hoyt can see we colonials are not so provincial."

"Good Lord, I haven't had your special for years!" exclaimed Dr. Kalmar. "Since about the time I came to Deneb, in fact."

"That's why it's a special. Reserved for state occasions, such as arrivals of colleagues from our dear old home planet."

"Oh, you don't have to go to all that bother," said Dr. Hoyt. "You'd have to make it twice — once now and once when I leave."

"That won't be for quite a while, will it?" Miss Dupont asked anxiously.

"As soon as I finish my internship. No more alien worlds for me. I like Earth."

Mrs. Kalmar got him to talk about it, which was much easier than getting him to stop, while

Dr. Kalmar showed the old man where the liquor stock and fixings were kept. Watching him mix the ingredients with a chemist's care, Dr. Kalmar felt a glow of nostalgia. He recalled the celebration at Dr. Lowell's house, several months after he had come from Earth, when he'd enjoyed himself so much that he'd passed out. It was one of the pleasanter memories of his start on Deneb.

"Can't mix them all in a single batch," Dr. Lowell explained, bringing the drinks over one at a time as he finished preparing them. "Mrs. Kalmar . . . Miss Dupont . . . our gracious host, Dr. Kalmar . . . and now Dr. Hoyt and myself." He lifted his glass at Dr. Hoyt. "Welcome to our latest associate — product, like ourselves, of the great medical schools of Earth. It's a forlorn hope, but may he learn as much from us about our peculiar methods as we learn from him about the latest terrestrial advances."

Dr. Hoyt, smiling as if he didn't think it possible, stood up when they'd downed their toast to him. "To Earth," he said. "May I get back in record time." He gulped it, said, "Delicious — for a colonial drink," and froze with his smile as fixed as if it had been painted on.

"Leo!" Miss Dupont cried, and shook him, but he stayed frozen.

"The man's allergic to alco-

hol!" said Dr. Kalmar, astonished.

"Do something!" Mrs. Kalmar begged. "Don't let him stand there like that! He — he looks like a petrified man!"

"Don't get panicky," said Dr. Lowell in a quiet, confident voice. "That's when you passed out, Dr. Kalmar. Right after your first taste of my special."

"But we haven't," Dr. Kalmar objected.

"Naturally. Your drinks weren't drugged."

"Drugged?" shrieked Miss Dupont. "You doped him?"

"That's rather obvious, isn't it?"

"But — what for?" Dr. Kalmar stammered.

"Same reason I slipped you a mickey not long after you got here. We can't take any chances that he'll ship back to Earth. You see?"

"I don't," raged Miss Dupont. "I think it's a cheap, dirty, foul trick and it won't work, either. You can't *keep* him drugged."

"I don't like you talking to Dr. Lowell like that," said Dr. Kalmar indignantly.

"You should be the last one to object," Mrs. Kalmar pointed out. "He said he drugged you, too."

"I know," Dr. Kalmar said blankly. "I don't understand —"

"You will," promised Dr. Lowell. "Just come along and don't interfere. Better give him the

order; it'll keep things straighter."

Mrs. Kalmar was grimly disapproving and Miss Dupont was close to hysteria. Only Dr. Kalmar retained his awed respect for Dr. Lowell. If the old man said it was all right, it was, even if he couldn't see the reason.

"Go ahead," urged Dr. Lowell.

"Dr. Hoyt!"

"Yes, Dr. Kalmar?"

"You will come with us!"

"Yes, Dr. Kalmar."

Dr. Lowell took them back to the hospital.

"Now what?" asked Dr. Kalmar.

"You actually don't know?" Miss Dupont demanded. "He wants to put Leo through the Ego Alter."

"That's absurd," Dr. Kalmar said angrily, "and an outright slander. Dr. Lowell wouldn't consider such a thing — the boy didn't ask for it and it wasn't authorized by Social Control."

Dr. Lowell smiled genially and opened the door to the Ego Alter room. "I hate to disillusion you, Dr. Kalmar. That's exactly what I have in mind — the same thing I did to you."

"That's absurd," Dr. Kalmar repeated, but with less conviction and more confusion than before.

"It worked. Tell him to sit down."

Dr. Kalmar did, and automatically fitted the wired plastic helmet to Dr. Hoyt's head.

"You can't!" cried Miss Dupont as he reached for the dials on the control console. "It's not fair!"

"Let's not get involved in a discussion on ethics," Dr. Lowell said. "Deneb can't afford to lose him; we need every doctor we have. If he goes back to Earth it may be years before we get a replacement."

"But you can't do it without his consent!"

"There's time for that later," the old man grinned. "Keep his eyes on you, Dr. Kalmar, while you build up his father image. Cut down on hostility, aggression and power drive. Boost social responsibility and adventurousness. But make sure he's looking at you constantly."

"I won't allow it," said Mrs. Kalmar flatly. "You won't make my husband violate his oath."

"I did it to him, didn't I?" Dr. Lowell replied jovially. "It got you a husband."

Miss Dupont grabbed at Dr. Kalmar's hand, but he had already turned on the current.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Well, he has to get married, of course," Dr. Lowell said. "Let him look at Miss Dupont — she's scheduled for this year, isn't she? — while you give him a shot of mating urge. Now, wipe out the memory of this incident and put him on a joy jag. We can validate that by liquoring him up after-

ward. When you're finished, bring him to."

Dr. Hoyt came out of it almost with a whoop. He lurched out of the insulated seat, stared at Miss Dupont for a moment with eyes that almost glittered, and seized and kissed her.

"My goodness!" she gasped.

"Now, what were you saying about ethics?" Dr. Lowell asked.

There was no answer. Both Miss Dupont and Mrs. Kalmar had frozen.

"You drugged them, too?" Dr. Kalmar weakly wanted to know.

"A bit slower-acting," admitted the old man. "All you have to do with them is wipe out the last half hour. Don't want any witnesses to an unethical act, you know. Oh, and put them on a jag also."

Dr. Kalmar followed instructions.

Finished, they left the three uproariously drunk in the waiting room and went to wash up. Dr. Kalmar went along bewilderedly. The old man was as unconcerned as if he did this sort of thing daily.

"I was as arrogant and belligerent as this squirt was?"

"Worse," Dr. Lowell said. "He was willing to finish out his internship. You weren't. Still worried about the ethics?"

"Yes. Naturally."

"All right, apply some logic, then. Are you happier on Deneb than you'd have been on Earth?"

"Well, certainly. I'd have been lucky to get a job doctoring in a summer camp. I wouldn't trade a roomy planet like this for the jammed cubicles of Earth. And I like our methods better than terrestrial dogma. But those are my preferences. I can't inflict them on anybody else."

"The hell they were your preferences. You bickered more about our methods and longed more loudly for the tenements of Earth than this lad ever did. All it took was a slight Ego Alter and you have a happier life than you would have had. Right?"

Dr. Kalmar felt his tension ease. If the old man said it was right, it was. He became momentarily resentful when he realized that that reaction had been installed by Dr. Lowell, but then he smiled. It really was right. A bit arbitrary, perhaps, but for the good of Dr. Hoyt and Deneb in the long run, just as it had been for himself.

"Look," he said, drying his arms. "I've been wanting my wife to go through a slight rephysical."

"Why don't you ask her?"

"The fact is that I'm afraid she'll think I'm dissatisfied and I don't want her to get resentful."

"Maybe she'd like you to do some changing, too."

"What for? I'm all right."

"She probably feels the same way about herself."

"But all I want are a few changes in her. She's as high as a space pilot now. It would be a cinch to —"

Dr. Lowell flung down the towel and gave him an outraged glare. "There's such a thing as professional ethics, Dr. Kalmar!"

"But you —"

"That's different. It was a social decision, not a selfish one. If you ask her and she agrees, that's up to her. But you can't take advantage of her in an ego-centric, arbitrary way. You just try it and I'll have you sent back to Earth."

Dr. Kalmar felt his knees grow weak in alarm. "No, no. It's not that important. Just an insignificant kind of wish."

And it was, he discovered when they went out to the waiting room. Unused to jags, Mrs. Kalmar was more affectionate than she'd been since they were first married; he'd have to remember to go on them periodically with her. Miss Dupont, unwilling to budge out of Dr. Hoyt's tight arms, had glassily joyous eyes. Dr. Hoyt didn't let her go until he caught sight of Dr. Kalmar.

"Greatest doctor I ever met," he said enthusiastically. "Won'ful planet, Deneb. Just wanna marry Miss Dupont, stay here and learn at your feet. Okay?"

Dr. Kalmar's glance at the old man was no less worshipful. "It couldn't be okayer," he said.

# THE WAY HOME



By THEODORE STURGEON

*Paul was running away from home. Maybe someday he'd come back, covered with glory and a few scars. To a guy who rescues fair damsels from alligators, scars are badges of honor.*

*Wait a minute. Paul didn't have scars; that was the young man who knew about women in Sacramento. Woman who rode around in expensive cars and ate chocolate-covered cherries . . . or was that some other woman?*

*If you've the knack of remembering what it was like to be a small boy, how easy it was to get day-dreams and reality mixed until you weren't sure where one left off and the other began, then Theodore Sturgeon wrote this story especially for you!*

WHEN Paul ran away from home, he met no one and saw nothing all the way to the highway. The highway swept sudden and wide from the turn by Keeper's Rise, past the blunt end of the Township Road, and narrowed off to a distant pinpoint pricking at the horizon. After a time Paul could see the car.

It was new and long and it threw down its snout a little as the driver braked, and when it stopped beside him it seesawed easily, once, on its big soft springs.

The driver was a large man, large and costly, with a grey Stetson and a dove-colored top-coat made of something that did not crease in the bend of his arms but rolled and folded instead. The woman beside him had a broad brow and a pointed chin. Her skin had peach shadings, but was deeply tanned, and her hair was

the red gold called "straw color" by a smith as he watches his forge. She smiled at the man and she smiled at Paul almost the same way.

"Hi, son," the man said. "This the old Township Road?"

"Yes sir," said Paul, "it sure is."

"Figured it was," said the man. "A feller don't forget."

"Reckon you don't," said Paul.

"Haven't seen the old town in twenty years," said the man. "I guess it ain't changed much."

"These old places don't change much," said Paul with scorn.

"Oh, they ain't so bad to come back to," said the man. "Hate to get chained down in one all my life, though."

"Me too," agreed Paul. "You from around here?"

"Why sure," said the man. "My name's Roudenbush. Any more Roudenbushes around



here that you know of, boy?"

"Place is full of 'em," said Paul. "Hey! You're not the Roudenbush kid that ran away twenty years ago?"

"The very one," said the man. "What happened after I left?"

"Why, they talk about you to this day," said Paul. "Your mother sickened and died, and your pa got up in meetin' a month after you left an' asked forgiveness for treatin' you so mean."

"Poor old feller," said the man. "I guess it was a little rough of me to run out like that. But he asked for it."

"I bet he did."

"This is my wife," said the man.

The woman smiled at Paul again. She did not speak. Paul could not think up what kind of a voice she might have. She leaned forward and opened up the glove compartment. It was cram full of chocolate-covered cherries.

"Been crazy about these ever since I was a kid," said the man. "Help yourself. I got ten pounds of them in the back." He leaned into the leather cushions, took out a silver cigar case, put a cigar between his teeth, and applied a lighter that flamed up like a little bonfire in his hand. "Yes, sir," said the man. "I got two more cars back in the city, and a tuxedo suit with shiny lapels. I made my killing in the stock market, and now I'm president of a

railroad. I'll be getting back there this evening, after I give the folks in the old town a treat."

Paul had a handful of chocolate-covered cherries. "Gee," he said. After that he walked on down the highway. The cherries disappeared and the man and the lady and the car all disappeared, but that didn't matter. "It'll be like that," said young Paul Roudenbush. "It'll be just like that." Then, "I wonder what that lady's name'll be."

A quarter of a mile down the pike was the turnoff to the school, and there was the railroad crossing with its big X on a pole which he always read RAIL CROSSING ROAD. The forenoon freight was bowling down the grade, screaming two longs, a short, and a long. When he was a kid, two years or so back, Paul used to think it saluted him: *Paul . . . Roud . . . n' Bush-h-h . . .* with the final sibilant made visible in the plume of steam on the engine's iron shoulder. Paul trotted up to the crossing and stood just where the first splintered plank met the road surface. Engine, tender, Pennsylvania, Nickel Plate, T. & N. O., Southern, Southern, Pennsylvania, Pere Marquette, Canadian Pacific. Cars from all over; hot places, cold places, far places. Automobiles, automobiles, cattle, tank. Tank tank cattle. Refrigerator, refrigerator, automobiles, ca-

boose. Caboose with a red flag flying, and a glimpse at the window of a bull-necked trainman shaving, suds on his jaws like a mad dog. Then the train was a dwindling rectangle on the track, and on its top was the silhouette of a brakeman, leaning easily into wind and velocity, walking on top of the boxcars.

With the train in one ear and dust in the other, Paul faced the highway. A man stood at the other side of the tracks. Paul gaped at him.

He was wearing an old brown jacket with a grey sheepskin collar, and blue dungarees. These he was dusting off with long weather-beaten hands, one of which — the right — looked like a claw. There was no ring-finger or little finger, and a third of the palm's breadth was gone. From the side of the middle finger to the side of the wrist, the hand was neatly sealed

with a type of flexible silvery scar-tissue.

He looked up from his dusting at Paul. "Hi, bub." Either he had a beard or he badly needed a shave. Paul could see the cleft in his square chin, though. The man had eyes as pale as the color of water poured into a glass after the milk had been drunk.

Paul said "Hi," still looking at the hand. The man asked him what that town was over there in the hollow, and Paul told him. He knew now what the man was — one of those fabulous characters who rides on freight trains from place to place. Rides the rods. Catch a fast freight out of Casey, which was K.C., which was Kansas City. They had been everywhere and done everything, these men, and they had a language all their own. Handouts and line bulls, Chi and mulligan and grab a rattler to Nollins.

The man squinched up his eyes



Illustrator "D. Stone"

at the town, as if he were trying to drive his gaze through the hill and see more. "The old place hasn't growed none," he said, and spat.

Paul spat too. "Never will," he said.

"You from there?"

"Yup."

"Me too," said the man surprisingly.

"Gosh," said Paul. "You don't look like you came from around here."

The man crossed the single track to Paul's side. "I guess I don't. I been a lot of places since I left here."

"Where you been?" asked Paul.

The man looked into Paul's open eyes, and through them to Paul's open credulousness. "All over the world," he said. "All over this country on freights, and all over the oceans on ships." He bared his right forearm. "Look there." And sure enough he had a tattoo.

"Women," said the man, flexing his claw so that the tattoo writhed. "That's what *I* like." He closed one pale eye, pushed his mouth sidewise under it, and clucked a rapid *chick-chick* from his pale cheek.

Paul wet his lips, spat again, and said, "Yeh. Oh boy."

The man laughed. He had bad teeth. "You're like I was. Wasn't room enough in that town for *me*."

"Me either," said Paul. "I

ain't going back there no more."

"Oh, you'll go back. You'll want to look it over, and ask a few questions around, and find out what happened to your old gals, and see how dead everything is, so's you can go away again knowin' you done right to leave in the first place. . . . This here's my second trip back. Seems like every time I go through this part o' the world I just got to drop by here and let the old burg give me a couple laughs." He turned his attention right around and looked outward again. "You really are headin' out, bub?"

"Headin' out," nodded Paul. He liked the sound of that. "Headin' out," he said again.

"Where you bound?"

"The city," Paul said, "unless I hit somethin' I like better 'fore I get there."

The man considered him. "Hey. Got any money?"

Paul shook his head cautiously. He had two dollars and ninety-two cents. The man seemed to make some decision; he shrugged. "Well, good luck, bub. More places you see, more of a man you'll be. Woman told me that once, in Sacramento."

"Th — *ok!*" said Paul. Approaching the grade crossing was a maroon coupe. "It's Mr. Sherman!"

"Who's he?"

"The sheriff. He'll be out lookin' for me!"

"Sheriff! Me for the brush. Don't tag me, you little squirt! Go the other way!" and he dived down the embankment and disappeared into the bushes.

Frightened by the man's sudden harshness, confused by the necessity for instant action, Paul shuffled for a moment, almost dancing, and then ran to the other side. Flat on his stomach in a growth of firewood, he stopped breathing and peered at the road. The coupe slowed, all but stopped. Paul closed his eyes in terror. Then he heard the grate of gears and the rising whine as the car pulled over the tracks in second gear and moaned on up the highway.

Paul waited five minutes, his fear leaving him exactly as fast as his sweat dried. Then he emerged and hurried along the highway, keeping a sharp watch ahead for the sheriff's returning car. He saw no sign of the man with the claw. But then, he hadn't really expected to.

It could be like that, he thought. Travel this old world over. Gramps used to say that men like that had an itching foot. Paul's feet itched a little, if he thought about it. Hurt a little, too. He could come back years from now with a tattoo and a mutilated hand. Folks'd really take notice. The stories he could tell! "*I run down the bank, see, to haul this tomato out o' th' drink. She was yellin' her blonde*

*head off. No sooner got my hooks on her when clompl a alligator takes off part o' me hand. I didn't mind none. Not when I carried this babe up the bank.*" He shut one eye, pushed his mouth sideways, and clucked. The sound, somehow, reminded him of chocolate-covered cherries. . . .

Another half-mile, and the country became more open. He flicked his eyes from side to side as he trudged. First sign of that maroon coupe and he'd have to fade. "*Sheriff! Me for the brush!*" He felt good. He could keep ahead of the law. Bet your life. Go where you want to go, do what you want to do, come back for a laugh every once in a while. That was better, even, than a big car and a tuxedo suit. Women. A smooth-faced one in the car beside you or *chick-chick!* women all over. Sacramento and every place, to tell you what a man you are, because of all the places you've been. Yup; that was it.

There was a deep drone from overhead. Paul looked up and saw the plane — one of the private planes that based at the airport forty miles away. Planes were no novelty, but Paul never saw one without an expressed wish that something would happen — not necessarily a crash, though that woukdn't be bad, but much rather something that would bring the plane down for a forced landing, so

he could run over and see the pilot get out, and maybe talk to him or even help him fix the trouble. "Let me know next time you're at the field," the pilot would say. . . .

Paul slowed, stopped, then went to the shoulder and sat down with his feet in the dry ditch. He watched the plane. It dipped a wing and circled, went off and came lower, made a run over the meadow. Paul thought he was going to — well, of course he was going to land!

The wheels touched, kicked up a puff of yellow dust that whisked out of existence in the prop-wash. They touched again and held the earth; the tail came down, bounced a little, and then the plane was carrying its wings instead of being carried. The wings were orange and the fuselage was blue, and it was glossy in the sun. The wings wobbled slightly as the plane taxied over the lumpy meadow, and Paul knew that if he held out his arms and wobbled them like that he would feel it in his shoulders.

The motor barked, and the propeller-blades became invisible as the pilot braked one wheel and turned the ship in its own length. The propeller, in profile, was a ghostly band and then a glass disc as the plane swung toward Paul. It snorted and wobbled across the meadow until it was within twenty feet of the fence and the ditch. Then, with a roar, it swung broad-

side to him and the sound of the motor dwindled to an easy *puap/-tick-tickety-puap!* while the pilot did knowledgeable things at the controls. Paul could see him in there, plain as day, through the cabin doors. The plane was beautiful; standing still it looked as if it was going two hundred miles an hour. The windshield swept right back over the pilot's head. It was fine.

The pilot opened the door and vaulted to the ground. "Glory be! You'd think they'd have a field built in town after all these years."

"They never will," said Paul. "Nice job you got there."

The pilot, pulling off a pair of high-cuffed gloves, looked briefly at the plane and grinned. He was very clean and had wide shoulders and practically no hips. He wore a good soft leather jacket and tight breeches. "Know anybody in town, son?"

"Everybody, I guess."

"Well, now, I can get all the news from you before I go on in."

"Say — ain't you Paul Roudenbush?"

Paul froze. *He* hadn't said that. There were sudden icy cramps in the backs of his knees. The plane vanished. The pilot vanished. Paul sat with his feet in the dry ditch and slowly turned his head.

A maroon coupe stood by the ditch. Its door was open, and

there, one foot on the running-board, was Mr. Sherman. *Sheriff? Me for the brush!*

Instead, he licked his lips and said, "Hi, Mr. Sherman."

"My," said Mr. Sherman, "you give me a turn, you did. Saw you sitting there so still, figured you'd been hit by a car or some such."

"I'm all right," said Paul faintly. He rose. Might as well get it over with. "I was just . . . thinkin', I guess."

Thinking — and now he was caught, and the thoughts raced through him like the cars of the forenoon freight; thoughts from hot places, cold places, far places. Stock-market, car, claw claw plane. Women, women, cigarette-lighter, landing field. Thoughts that were real, thoughts that he made up; they barrelled on through him, with a roar and a swirl, and left him standing, facing the highway, and Mr. Sherman, who had caught him.

"Thinking, eh? Well, I'm right relieved," said Mr. Sherman. He got back in the car, slammed the door, stepped on the starter.

"Mr. Sherman — ain't you —"

"Ain't I what, son?"

"Nothin', Mr. Sherman. Nothin' at all."

"You're a weird one," said Mr. Sherman, shaking his head. "Hey, I'm heading back into town. Want a lift? It's near eating time."

"No, thanks," said Paul immediately and with great sincerity.

Paul watched the maroon coupe move off, his mind racing. The car was going into town. Without him. Mr. Sherman did not know he was running away. Why not? Well, they hadn't missed him yet. Unless . . . unless they didn't care whether he came back or not. No. No, that couldn't be! The car would go right past his house, soon's it got in town. Wasn't much of a house. In it, though, was his own room. Small, but absolutely his own.

The trouble with the other ways to go back, it took time to make a killing in the stock-market and get married. It took time to acquire a plane. It probably took quite a while to get part of your hand cut off. But this way —

Suddenly he was in the road screaming. "Mr. Sherman! Mr. Sherman!"

Mr. Sherman didn't hear him but he saw him in the rear-view mirror. He stopped and backed up a bit. Paul climbed in, gasped his thanks, and sat still, working on his wind. He got it all back just about the time they turned into the Township Road.

Mr. Sherman glanced abruptly at the boy. "Paul."

"Yessir."

"I just had a thought. You, way out there on the pike; were you running away?"

Paul said "No." His eyes were more puzzled than anything else. "I was coming back," he said.



# TURNOVER POINT

By ALFRED COPPEL

*Every era in history has had its Pop Ganton's. Along in years and not successful and not caring much anyway. A matter of living out their years, following an obscure path to oblivion.*

*It was that way in ancient Egypt, just as it will be when the Solar System shrinks to our size. And once in a while such men are given an opportunity to contribute to the society that has forgotten them. . . .*

POP GANTON was no hero — he was only a spaceman. A spaceman and a father. In fact, Pop was rather no-account, even in a profession that abounded with drifters. He had made a meagre living prospecting asteroids and



hauling light freight and an occasional passenger out in the Belt Region. Coffee and cakes, nothing more. Not many people knew Pop had a son in the Patrol, and even fewer knew it when the boy was blasted to a cinder in a back alley in Lower Marsport.

Pop went on eating and breathing, but his life was over after that. He hit the bottle a little harder and his ship, *The Luck*, grew rustier and tackier, and those were the only outward signs that Pop Ganlon was a living dead man. He kept on grubbing among the cold rocks and pushing *The Luck* from Marsport to Callisto and back with whatever low-mass payloads he could pick up. He might have lived out his string of years like that, obscure and alone, if it hadn't been for John Kane. Kane was Pop Ganlon's ticket to a sort of personal immortality — if there is such a thing for an old spaceman.

It was in Yakki, down-canal from Marsport, that Kane found Pop. There is a small spaceport there — a boneyard, really — for buckets whose skippers can't pay the heavy tariff imposed by the big ramp. All the wrecks nest there while waiting hopefully for a payload or a grubstake. They have all of Solis Lacus for a landing field, and if they spill it doesn't matter much. The drifting red sands soon cover up the scattered shards of dural and the slow,

lonely life of Yakki goes on like before.

The Patrol was on Kane's trail and the blaster in his hand was still warm when he shoved it up against Pop Ganlon's ribs and made his proposition.

He wanted to get off Mars — out to Callisto. To Blackwater, to Ley's Landing, it didn't matter too much. Just off Mars, and quickly. His eyes had a metallic glitter and his hand was rock-steady. Pop knew he meant what he said when he told him life was cheap. Someone else's life, not Kane's.

That's how it happened that *The Luck* lifted that night from Yakki, outward bound for Ley's Landing, with Pop and Kane aboard her alone.

Sitting at the battered console of *The Luck*, Pop watched his passenger. He knew Kane, of course. Or rather, he knew of him. A killer. The kind that thrives and grows fat on the frontiers. The bulky frame, the cropped black hair, the predatory eyes that looked like two blaster muzzles. They were all familiar to Pop. Kane was all steel and meanness. The kind of carrion bird that took what others had worked for. Not big time, you understand. In another age he'd have been a torpedo — a hiring killer. But out among the stars he was working for himself. And doing well.

Pop didn't care. His loyalty to the Patrol had stopped quite suddenly not long before — in a dark alley in Lower Marsport. This was only a job, he told himself now. A job for coffee and cakes, and maybe a grubstake to work a few more lonely rocks. Life had become a habit for Pop, even if living had ended.

"What are you staring at, Pop?" Kane's voice was like the rest of him. Harsh and cold as space itself.

"At you, I guess," Pop said, "I was wondering what you'd done — and where — and to whom."

"You're a nosy old man," Kane said. "Just get me to Ley's Landing. That's what I'm paying for, not a thing more."

Pop nodded slowly and turned back to the control board. They were above the Belt by now, and a few short hours from turnover point. The cranky drives of *The Luck* needed all his attention.

Presently he said, "We'll be turning over soon. Want to get some rest?"

Kane laughed. "No thanks, old man. I'll stay here and watch you."

Pop eyed the ready blaster and nodded again. He wondered vaguely how it would feel to die under the blast of such a weapon. It couldn't be very painful. He hoped it wasn't painful. Perhaps the boy hadn't suffered. It would

be nice to be sure, he thought.

There wasn't much for Pop to remember about the boy. He'd never been one for writing many letters. But the District Patrolman had come down to Yakki and looked Pop up — afterward. He'd said the boy was a good officer. A good cop. Died doing his job, and all that sort of thing. Pop swallowed hard. His job. What had 'his job' been that night in Lower Marsport, he wondered. Had someone else finished it for him?

He remembered about that time hearing on the Mars Radio that a Triangle Post Office had been knocked over by a gunman. That might have been it. The Patrol would be after anyone knocking over EMV Triangle property. The Earth-Mars-Venus Government supported the Patrol for things like that.

Pop guided *The Luck* skillfully above the Belt, avoiding with practiced ease the few errant chunks of rock that hurtled up out of the swarms. He talked to Kane because he was starved for talk — certainly not because he was trying to play Sherlock. Pop had long ago realized that he was no mental giant. Besides, he owed the Patrol nothing. Not a damned thing.

"Made this trip often?" Pop tried to strike up a conversation with Kane. His long loneliness seemed sharper, somehow, more

poignant, when he actually had someone to talk to.

"Not often. I'm no space pig." It was said with scorn.

"There's a lot to spacing, you know," Pop urged.

Kane shrugged. "I know easier ways to make a buck, old timer."

"Like how?"

"A nossey old man, like I said," Kane smiled. Somehow, the smile wasn't friendly. "Okay, Pop, since you ask. Like knocking off wacky old prospectors for their dust. Or sticking up sandcar caravans out in Syrtis. Who's the wiser? The red dust takes care of the leftovers."

Pop shook his head. "Not for me. There's the Patrol to think of."

Kane laughed. "Punks. Bell-boys. They'd better learn to shoot before they leave their school-books."

Pop Canlon frowned slightly. "You talk big, mister."

Kane's eyes took on that metallic glitter again. He leaned forward and threw a canvas packet on the console. It spilled crisp new EMV certificates. Large ones. "I take big, too," he said.

Pop stared. Not at the money. It was more than he had ever seen in one pile before, but it wasn't that that shook him. It was the canvas packet. It was marked: *Postal Service, EMV*. Pop suddenly felt cold, as though an icy wind had touched him.

"You . . . you killed a Patrolman for this," he said slowly.

"That's right, Pop," grinned Kane easily. "Burned him down in an alley in Lower Marsport. It was like taking candy from a baby. . . ."

Pop Canlon swallowed hard. "Like taking candy from a . . . baby. As easy as that. . . ."

"As easy as that, old man," Kane said.

Pop knew he was going to die then. He knew Kane would blast him right after turnover point, and he knew fear. He felt something else, too. Something that was new to him. Hate. An icy hate that left him shaken and weak.

So the boy's job hadn't been finished. It was still to do.

There was no use in dreaming of killing Kane. Pop was old. Kane was young — and a killer. Pop was alone and without weapons — save *The Luck*. . . .

Time passed slowly. Outside, the night of deep space keened soundlessly. The stars burned bright, alien and strange. It was time, thought Pop bleakly. Time to turn *The Luck*.

"Turnover point," he said softly.

Kane motioned with his blaster. "Get at it."

Pop began winding the fly-wheel. It made a whirring sound in the confined space of the tiny

control room. Outside, the night began to pivot slowly.

"We have to turn end-for-end," Pop said. That way we can decelerate on the drop into Callisto. But, of course, you know all about that, Mr. Kane."

"I told you I'm no space pig," Kane said brusquely. "I can handle a landing and maybe a takeoff, but the rest of it I leave for the boatmen. Like you, Pop."

Pop spun the flywheel in silence, listening to the soft whir. Presently, he let the wheel slow and then stop. He straightened and looked up at Kane. The blaster muzzle was six inches from his belly. He swallowed against the dryness in his throat.

"You . . . you're going to kill me," Pop said. It wasn't a question. Kane smiled, showing white teeth.

"I . . . I know you are," Pop said unsteadily. "But first, I want to say something to you."

"Talk, old timer," Kane said. "But not too much."

"That boy—that boy you killed in Marsport. He was my son," Pop said.

Kane's face did not change expression. "Okay. So what?"

Pop's lips twitched. "I just wanted to hear you say it." He looked at the impassive face of the killer. "You made a mistake, Mr. Kane. You shouldn't have done that to my boy."

"Is that all?"

Pop nodded slowly. "I guess that's all."

Kane grinned. "Afraid, old man?"

"I'm a space pig," Pop said. "Space takes care of its own."

"You're in a bad way, old timer," Kane said, "and you haven't much sense. I'm doing you a favor."

Pop lifted his hands in an instinctive gesture of futile protection as the blaster erupted flame.

There was a smell in the control room like burnt meat as Kane holstered his weapon and turned the old man over with a foot. Pop was a blackened mass. Kane dragged him to the valve and jet-tisoned the body into space.

Alone among the stars, *The Luck* moved across the velvet night. The steady beat of flame from her tubes was a tiny spark of man-made vengeance on the face of the deeps.

From her turnover point, she drove outward toward the spinning Jovian moons. For a short while she could be seen from the EMV Observatory on Callisto, but very soon she faded into the outer darkness.

Much later, the Observatory at Land's End on Triton watched her heading past the gibbous mass of Pluto—out into the interstellar fastnesses.

The thrumming of the jets was

(Continued on page 162)



# BELLY LAUGH

By IVAR JORGENSEN

*You hear a lot of talk these days about secret weapons. If it's not a new wrinkle in nuclear fission, it's a gun to shoot around corners and down winding staircases. Or maybe a nice new strain of bacteria guaranteed to give you radio-active dandruff. Our own suggestion is to pipe a few of our television commercials into Russia and bore the enemy to death.*

*Well, it seems that Ivar Jorgensen has hit on the ultimate engine of destruction: a weapon designed to exploit man's greatest weakness. The blueprint can be found in the next few pages; and as the soldier in the story says, our only hope is to keep a sense of humor!*

**M**RE? I'm looking for my outfit. Got cut off in that Holland Tunnel attack. Mind if I sit down with you guys a while? Thanks. Coffee? Damn! This is heaven. Ain't seen a cup of coffee in a year.

What? You said it! This sure is a hell of a war. Tough on a guy's feet. Yeah, that's right. Holland

Tunnel skirmish. Where the Ruskies used that new gun. Uhuh. God! It was awful. Guys popping off all around a guy and him not knowing why. No sense to it. No noise. No wound. Just popping off.

That's the trouble with this war. It won't settle down to a routine. Always something new. What

the hell chance has a guy got to figure things out? And I tell you them Ruskies are coming up with new weapons just as fast as we are. Enough to make your hair stand on end.

Sugar? Christ, yes! Ain't seen sugar for a year. You see, it's like this: we were bottled up in the pits around the Tunnel for seven damn days. It was like nothing you ever saw before. Oops — sorry. Didn't mean to splash you. I was laughing about something that happened there — to a guy. Maybe you guys would get a kick out of it. After all, we got to keep our sense of humor.

\* You see, there was me and a Kentucky kid named Stillwell in this pit — a pretty big pit with lots of room — and we were all alone. This Stillwell was a nice kid — green and lonesome and it's pretty sad, really, but there's a yak in it, and — as I say — we got to keep a sense of humor.

Well, this Stillwell — a really green kid — is unhappy and just plain drooling for his gal back home. He talks about his mother, of course, and his old man, but it's the girl that's really on his mind as you guys can plainly understand.

He's seeing her every place — like spots in front of his eyes — nice spots doing things to him, when this Ruskie babe shows up.

My gun came up without any orders from me just as she poked her pusa over the edge of the pit,

and — huh? Oh, thank you kindly. It sure tastes good but I don't want to shoot you guys. Thank you kindly.

Well, as I was saying, this Ruskie babe pokes her nose over the edge of the pit and Stillwell dives and knocks down my gun. He says, "You son-of-a-bitch!" Just like that. Wild and desperate, like you'd say to a guy if the guy was just kicking over the last jug of water on a desert island.

It would have been long enough for her to kill us if I hadn't had good reflexes. Even then, all I had time to do was knock the pistol out of her hand and drag her into the pit.

With her play bollixed, she was confused and bewildered. She ain't a fighter, and she sits back against the wall staring at us dead pan with big expressionless eyes. She's a plenty pretty babe and I could see exactly what had happened as far as Stillwell was concerned. His spots had come to life in very adequate form so to speak.

Stillwell goes over and sits down beside her and I'm very much on the alert, because I know where his courage comes from. But I decide it's all right, because I see the babe is not belligerent, just confused kind of. And friendly.

And willing. Kind of a whipped-little-dog willing, and man oh man! She was sure what Stillwell needed.

They kind of went together like

a hand and a glove — natural-like. And it followed — pretty natural — that when Stillwell got up and led her around a wing of the pit, out of sight, she went willing — like that same little dog.

Uhuh. No, you guys. Two's enough. I wouldn't rob you. Well, okay, and thanks kindly.

Well, there I was, all alone, but happy for Stillwell, cause I know it's what the kid needs, and in spots like that what difference does it make? Yank — Ruskie — Mongolian — as long as she's willing.

Then, you guys, Stillwell comes back out — wall-eyed — real wall-eyed — like being hit but not knocked out and still walking. I know what it is — some kind of shock. I get up and walk over and take a look at the babe where he'd left her — and I bust out laughing. I told you guys there was a yak in this. I laughed like a fool —

it was that funny. As much as I had time to, before Stillwell cracked. It was enough to crack him — the little thing that pushes a guy over the edge.

He lets out a yell and screams, "For crissake! For crissake! Nothing but a bucket of bolts! Nothing but a couple of plastic lumps —"

That was when I hit him. I had to. He was for the birds, Stillwell was. An hour later we got relieved and a couple of medicos carried him away strapped to a stretcher — gone like a kite.

They took the robot too, and its clothes, but they forgot the brassiere, so I took it and I been carrying it ever since, but I'll leave it with you guys if you want — for the coffee. Might make you think about home. After all, like the man says, we got to keep our sense of humor.

Well, so long, you guys — and thanks.

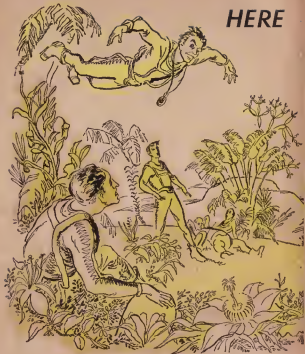
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TALK about women not being able to make up their minds. Look at old Mother Earth, she goes in eight different directions at one time:

- (1) She revolves around the sun with a speed of about 19 miles a second
- (2) She rotates upon her own axis at about 500 yards per second
- (3) She participates in the sun's forward motion in the direction of Vega, the stationery star
- (4) The gravitational influence of the moon gravitates her
- (5) She is part of the solar system's rotary motion upon its axis
- (6) She takes part in the solar system's revolution around a common center of gravity
- (7) She swings from the poles toward the equator
- (8) And she has some responsibility for the precession of the equinoxes which is caused by the attraction of the sun and moon on the ring of heavy matter which forms the equatorial protuberance of the Earth.



HERE



# THERE BE TYGERS

By RAY BRADBURY

*If you are wondering why we're presenting this particular story by Ray Bradbury, here's the reason. A new one we had counted on just didn't come through after we'd put his name on the cover. It meant we had to reprint one of his best — or drop him out entirely. More than likely you haven't read this one before anyway . . . and take it from us he has never done better.*

*We'd rather not tell you anything about it here. Ray's fiction is always far more than plot. Much of its charm and value is found in the magic of his style — a style which has made his work unique.*



YOU'LL never come back." Hellman pared his fingernails casually. "Something frightening will happen to you, something vile and terrible. Remember the other expeditions. My God, the first Mars rocket killed off by hallucinations, the Weckner-Venus party baked alive, I hear." Hellman gestured to a three-dimensional map which hung like a dark mobile in the center of his parlor. Glittering planets floated there in a black void. "It's a hobby of mine," he said. "You see the tiny rocket ships there, on each tiny planet? I keep track, just like the government. When a particular

rocket fails to return from some horrible world or other, I simply —" He twitched his hand delicately, wrist-deep, into the silent depths of the map. "—toss the rocket into the waste-basket." Something like a silver seed tinkled from his fingers into the basket. "And turn off the light in that one tiny world." Click. A planet stopped gleaming in the small night. "Another world investigated and found wanting, another multi-million-dollar expedition down the cosmic drain. No, my dear Forester, you'll never come back alive. Look. I've numbered this tiny new little rocket A-1000 for you and your men. You're traveling off to Planet 4 of Star System 70, right? Well, here's Planet 4; I'll switch it on for you. There. And one year from tonight, when you don't show up, I'll switch it off again and throw this little rocket of yours into the incinerator. Good-bye forever, dear friend."

Hellman smiled knowingly as he released the tiny needle-rocket at the rim of the dark galaxy. The rocket flew quietly into space leaving Hellman, the cynic, far behind. . . .

"That's it," said Forester.

He nodded out the port and the men looked with him at the beautiful globe of soil and sea and forest and cloud that swung up under their rocket. A month had

passed, they had slept most of it away in the hypnotic machines and now, like children freshly awakened for their morning exercises, they waited for their ship to touch Planet Four in Star System 70.

"I keep thinking about what Hellman said." The man next to Forester rubbed his chin. "Will we come through this alive?"

Forester laughed. "Yes. Because we're us. I always feel that way, don't you? Bad things always happen to other people, not to us; not to me. I'll live forever."

"A comforting but hardly logical thought when one is impaled on a rhino-carpis."

"Rhino-carpis?"

"A terrible beast my father made up when I was a boy. He always said he'd throw me to the rhino-carpsises if I wasn't good."

The men laughed quietly. They gazed at the planet which rose softly to touch the ship. The automatic landing units functioned like the oiled machinery of a Swiss typewriter.

"Ours is a funny policy when you think of it," said Koestler, the radiologist. "We send rockets to each new world. If the rockets fail to return, we never send a second one to check the reason why. There are so many worlds we can't waste time on a hostile one, fighting futile wars, subduing natives; problems of logistics and all that."

"A very sensible policy," said Forester. "Each rocket represents two years of time, ten million dollars, and God knows what in human lives, the years it took to educate us all. No use throwing us out with the bath-water, eh?"

"And yet," replied Koestler, "I can't stop wondering. What happened to all those rockets on all those worlds we never went back to check on a second time? Oh, we know what happened on Mars, the men were killed. We had to go back there, it was an operational base. But what of all those lost expeditions on worlds we'll never try again?"

"Simple. The men either crashed, or were burned by natives, shot, stabbed, or broiled for supper."

"Why must we talk this way a moment before we step out on a new planet, with God-knows-what waiting for us?" A third man moved forward between them.

"Right, Driscoll." Forester turned. "Let's get into our equipment. Going ashore in five minutes."

The men walked off.

Only Forester remained behind for a moment at the crystal port staring out at the green world of grass and lakes. "Well," he whispered to himself, "what if Hellman was right?"

Driscoll held a handful of yellow flowers out before him. "Here

are your rhino-carpisses, Koestler!"

Koestler eyed the distant forest. "We've only been walking a few minutes. No telling, they may have guillotines set up in the woods, and oil-vats to boil us in."

The men loosened their guns in their creaking holsters.

They walked forward through open fields of clover, coming to no highway or fence or building. They walked under a mellow sun and there was a mellow wind blowing all about.

"Ho-ho!" said Driscoll, standing at the top of a little rise.

The others glanced at him.

"I was just thinking. *Feel.*" Driscoll held his arms out loosely. "Feel how the wind is. Remember when you were a kid? Remember how you used to run and how the wind felt? Like feathers around your arms. You thought you could fly. You ran and you thought any moment you'd fly, my God, you'd've given your right arm to fly. But you never quite did."

The men stood remembering. There was an aspect to the day that encouraged such remembering. The smells of pollen and weed and some distant and delicious fruit, a smell of new rain drying upon a million blades of grass.

Driscoll gave a little run. "Feel it, by God. The wind. You know, we never have *really* flown. For all our science we have to fit our-

selves into blundering big planes and jets and rockets, tons of junk and trickery. But what I mean is the simple thing itself, flying alone, flying with nothing but your arms, flying like a bird. The thing you felt twenty years back. When you were so high, just to put your arms out like this." He extended his arms. "And run." He began to run ahead of them, laughing at his own idiocy. "And fly!" he cried.

He flew.

Time passed on the silent gold wrist watches of the men standing below. Five minutes ticked by. They shielded their eyes from the sun. They stared up. They seemed to be watching some high sport, some shuttlecock in the air, luminous and changing. They turned their gaze in six directions. And from the air came a high sound of almost unbelievable laughter.

At last, Driscoll flew down.

He landed at their feet, tears of laughter and disbelief rolling from his blue eyes. "Did you see me! My God, did you see! I flew! For God's sake, I flew! Did you see it?"

They had seen. They had watched him soaring higher and higher into a blue sky to dive and flip about like a boy rollicking on a blue mattress.

"Let me sit down. Lord, oh Lord." He gasped and slapped his knees, chuckling. He made a

twittering motion of his fingers. "I'm a sparrow, I'm a robin, I'm a hawk, damn it! Go on, all of you! Try it!"

"What happened?" Forester knelt beside him.

"It's the wind, that's what it is. I didn't do a thing but think I wanted to fly. I ran, and next thing I knew the wind picked me up and there I was in the air. Scared the hell out of me. But then I knew I couldn't fall. The wind wouldn't let me."

"What do you think?" Forester glanced at the other men. "Shall we go back to the rocket and get out of here?"

"Get out of here?" cried Driscoll, sobering, but still amused. "Why? It's perfect. You can have your rockets. I can fly, by God, better than any jet in the universe, and to hell with rockets and planes."

The men shuffled their feet. They gazed at the great soft area of sky waiting to be jumped upon in coiled-spring abandon; there was the vast and serene playground, and the wind whistling over their ears, calling to them.

"It's all right," said Driscoll. "You're too suspicious."

"In the interests of science, let's experiment," said Chatterton, the anthropologist, drily.

Forester examined his arms, frowning. He put them out on the warm-cool air. The wind wavered and trembled the cloth, sighing,

whispering. There was a kite sound in the air, a humming as of strings and paper, a sound of eternal March.

"How did you do it, Driscoll?"

Driscoll considered. "I ran. I put up my arms. And then." He hesitated. "I asked the wind."

"Oh, come off it!"

"I did. And it flew me, Lord, like a feather!"

"All right." Forester waved the others back. "I'll take a chance. If I'm killed, if I fall, back to the ship, all of you."

He took a deep breath. "Now, once more, Driscoll?"

"Run."

"I feel like an idiot."

"Run faster. That's it. Faster!" He ran.

"Now, put up your arms."

He put up his arms.

"Now, ask the wind to give you a sail, go on!"

Forester's lips trembled.

Everyone shouted and looked up.

"There he goes," said Driscoll, seated on the ground.

It was twilight.

The men sat on the hilltop, exhausted and laughing.

"Well, that's all of us!"

"Everyone had his turn!"

"God, isn't it perfect?"

"It's the thing!"

They had flown in duos, trios, quartettes, in squadrons. They had flown like orioles or eagles or

sparrows, each according to his body weight and agility. But they were all happy.

"That's it, exactly." Driscoll put a hand up to feel the smile on his face, as if it were a strange mask. "Now I know what it is. I'm happy. I haven't been this happy in a good fifteen years."

One of the men came running up, jumping, half-flying, with canteens in his arms. "Hey, I found a creek! Best darned water you ever drank!"

Forester accepted a canteen. "Did you test it?"

"It's tested and pure."

The men passed the canteens from hand to hand, pressing them to their parched and exhausted mouths.

Forester splashed some of the stuff into his palm and sniffed.

"Wine," he said.

"It can't be."

"Smell it. Taste it. White wine."

The man who had fetched it gave a hoot. "Right! I followed the creek up."

"It can't be."

"No, it's real. I found the forest where the creek starts. A big place with trees so thick you can't get in, and a ton of berries on each tree. The berries fall like snow, all the time. As soon as some fall, others grow. And the berries get caught in a kind of floe there, so heavy that the ones on the bottom are crushed out and the fluid is

caught in a kind of stone quarry there. They ferment by themselves. Maybe there're yeast spores in it. Hell, who knows? By the time it flows down here in a creek, it's wine."

"French domestic," Driscoll sipped his.

"Go easy on it," warned Forester.

They passed the canteens twice more around.

"Well," said Forester at last. "Time to break this up and build a camp. Or should we sleep in the ship tonight?"

"Neither," said Driscoll. "We can sleep out here on the ground. We don't need a camp or a fire to keep warm. Feel that air. It's going to be eighty-six degrees warm all night long. We'll sleep like babes."

"But out in the open . . ."

"We'll post a guard, of course."

Everyone nodded, happily, drowsily.

"Break out the supper rations."

"Captain Forester," Chatterton came floating up, sublime and ridiculous in his new element. "Supper's waiting for us yonder. Have a look."

The men walked half down the hill and then remembering that they could fly, flew. They landed where a small stream jumped into a bubbling pool of boiling water. The men stood about the pool rim waiting. Moments later four

fish, weighing five pounds each, swam along the cold creek and fell, glittering and wriggling, down through the interior of the hot spring. They floated to the top of the spring a minute later, cooked. Chatterton fished them out with a net.

"What did you say about supper, Captain?"

There were twenty varieties of fruit for dessert. After supper, the warriors of the rocket lay stuffed while their captain philosophized.

"I am still suspicious."

"No, Captain."

"To quote an old map, one I saw when I was studying medieval history, time of Columbus, the map said, 'Here there be tygers.' Well, where are the tigers, where are the lions, the meat-eaters, where the cannibals and the missionary kettles aboil?"

"It was a miracle!" said Koestler. "There were the trees, green, but no fruit on them. And I asked the trees and they grew fruit and dropped it on the grass."

"We are all a little drunk."

"Hardly that. It's simply that this planet is alive. The soil is a living flesh. It's a race unto itself, and what a race, what a people it is! The trees have no special season except the season of our minds. The season of thinking, the season of hunger. If we should go away, there would be a long winter, but on our return the trees would summer again and there'd



be food. And the wind's alive. Why not? It's molecules and atoms, isn't it? So it has a soul, it lives, it thinks, it can soar us about. Is that unusual? Not to a truly devout thinker; a rarity itself today. Life itself is a damned miracle. I've never gotten over thinking about it."

Koessler patted the grass at his side with tender curiosity. "Why, I bet you if you asked the grass to grow and blanket you at night to keep you warm, it would. Except we won't have to do that. We'll just ask the wind to blow summer breezes and it will, all night."

Now, softly, a great and gentle rain began to fall upon the green

world. It was a rain of serenity and peace. They could hear it touch a billion times upon the nearby trees and grass blades.

"The final touch," said Driscoll. "We'll never have to build houses here on this planet."

"Why not?"

"It's raining, stupid, but you notice it's not raining *on* us. It's raining all around, all around, on every side, but where we are, it never rains. It rains ahead of us, it rains after we pass. Even the rain has a season of the mind, has a courtesy and a respect for us. This is a very kind world, gentlemen."

"I don't believe that about the rain," murmured some one. "I believe the other things, yes, but



I don't believe that."

"I'll prove it." Driscoll jumped up, swaying just a trifle, chuckling, and walked straight out into the downpour. He stood with his arms out. The rain did not touch him. When he returned, he was dry. Everyone felt of his uniform.

"On the other hand," he said. "Watch." He stripped off his uniform. Probing among his supplies, he walked out into the storm with a bar of green soap. He looked up as if addressing the million drops of water and said, "Now, I'll have some, thank you."

The rain drenched him.

He stood singing a song, lathering his body, having it washed off, lathering and rewashing himself, again and again.

The rain was gone. The moon was rising over the freshened hills.

"There's only one more thing," said Koestler.

"Yes," said everyone.

They looked at the forest and beyond.

They waited.

"It doesn't work," said Driscoll. "I've been thinking very hard, but that's different. I think we'll have to go looking."

"Let's be logical." Koestler lit a cigarette. "If you ask for the wind to fly you and you ask for the trees to feed you, and you ask for the rain to bathe you, and everything is obediently alive, then, with any sort of logic at all,

one need only ask this world for the bounty of feminine companionship."

"I've thought a long time," said Chatterton. "We're all bachelors. The Service won't take married men. So here we are, men who've been up and down the system to the colonized planets for five or six years, hit every port. I'm tired of that. I want to settle down." He saw the others nod. "Wouldn't it be nice to . . . well . . . get married, and settle here? Do you realize how simple life could be? What do we do on Earth? We work like hell all our lives just to save enough to buy a house. We pay taxes. The cities stink of gasoline and exhaust fumes. Here, you don't even need a house, the weather is perfect all the time. If it gets monotonous you can ask for rain and clouds and changes, but you don't have to be uncomfortable."

"By God, you're right. Takes half a man's income half his life just to buy a home or car, and feed his face, on Earth."

"Who needs cars? Who worries about fueling the wind here, or checking its transmission and tires and oil?"

The men laughed.

"But you need houses, for privacy."

"Live in the forest."

"Right. And we won't have to work for food, it's here, wine, fruits, vegetables, cooked fish.

I'm tempted."

"It's dangerous," said Forester. "You get soft. Look at the South Sea islanders, where did they ever get? What did they ever do? Life was so easy for them, they had to make up a tattoo ritual that was so terrifying it was the main event of their lives. Life was so boring, they had to cook up a trick thing like hurting themselves on purpose to keep the race on its feet. That would happen here, too, to us."

"I'm not afraid of that," said Chatterton. "This is a versatile planet, Captain. We're sitting on the bald dome of Plato, and the shaved head of Caesar, combined. What was it you said awhile back — 'Here there be tygers' Well, if life should ever soften too much, we need only repeat that phrase a bit, 'Here there be tygers. Here there be tygers.' and listen. . . ."

Far away, wasn't there the faintest roar of a giant cat, hidden in the deep night forest?

The men shivered and turned to each other, smiling.

"Don't worry about this planet, Captain, it'll take care of itself."

"There's only one thing makes me sad," said Driscoll.

"What's that?"

"Suppose there *are* people here, suppose their women are beautiful, suppose we meet them, and everything is agreeable. Then we go home and tell everyone on

Earth and everyone rushes here to the Happy Hunting Ground to ruin it. Lord, they'd tramp hell out of it, you know they would!"

"Yes," said everyone, scowling, thinking of it.

"That's right."

"The brow of Plato, remember," said Chatterton. "Give this planet credit for some sense. To a few men it presents its versatile and sunny face. To an invasion of ten million men? What would they find? A muck-bog, a swamp, a fog world infested with sixty trillion mosquitoes, and ten billion dinosaurs, not worth bothering with." He slapped the earth under his feet. "Good old wise planet!"

Everyone nodded and lay down to sleep.

"Good night."

"Good night."

"Did you notice, after you drank so much of the wine, you didn't want any more? Just enough to make you mildly happy."

"A world of moderation."

"Good night."

They lay with their eyes open. They lay listening to something like a great heart of earth beating slowly and warmly under their bodies. One by one they shut their eyes until only Forester lay awake, watching the stars. It's a trifle warm, he thought.

A cool breeze fanned his head. I'm thirsty, he thought.

A drop of rain splashed on his mouth.

He laughed quietly.

I'm lonely, he thought.

Distantly, he heard voices; soft high voices.

He turned his eyes in upon a vision. There was a group of hills from which flowed a clear river, and in the shallows of that river, sending up spray, white and swift themselves, with flowing hair, their faces bubbled and shimmering, were the beautiful women.

They played like children on the banks. And it came to Forester to know about them and their life. They were nomads. They roamed over the face of this planet as was their desire. There were no cities or houses, there were no highways, there were only forests and hills and valleys and plains. There were no machines, only winds to carry them like white feathers where they wished. As Forester asked the questions, some invisible answerer chimed the answers. Are they women? They are women. Where are the men? There are no men. These women produce their race, alone. The men died out on this world fifty thousand years ago. And where are these women now? A mile down from the green forest, a mile over on the wine creek by the six white stones, and a third mile to the large river. There, at the shallows, are the women, who

will make fine wives, and raise beautiful children.

Forester opened his eyes. At that instant a tiny scattering of rain fell upon the sleeping men, a gesture, it almost seemed, to waken them. Their eyes were open, brightly, and they were sitting up.

"I had a dream."

"So did I."

"And me."

"And me."

They sat for a long moment. They looked toward the rocket. "What about it? What about Earth?"

They stood up without a word and began to collect their gear. Forester walked back to the rocket and kicked its hull contemplatively, slowly. Driscoll came up behind him. "Well, Captain?"

"We'll leave her here."

"I say dismantle her."

"Why?"

"So we can never go back. So no one will ever know what happened to us. So they'll never come and investigate and spoil this beautiful place." They waited. "What do you say?"

"You're right. We'll dismantle the rocket tomorrow. But now, tonight —"

"You afraid, sir?"

"No."

"You dream the same as I did?"

They were back among the men

now. "Yes. A mile down from the green forest . . ."

". . . a mile over on the wine creek. . . ." recited Chatterton.

". . . by the six white stones," said Koestler.

"And a third mile to the large river," said all the men, in a ragged, self-conscious chorus.

Someone tossed down their gear. "What do I want with *that*? To heck with it, I won't need it."

The other men threw down their equipment, too.

"Shall we walk or fly, Captain?" asked Driscoll.

"I think we'll walk," said Forester. "It's such a nice night, moon out bright, and it's good to think about a thing and anticipate a long time before. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, sir," said the men.

They began to walk.

"Hellman," said Forester.

"What, sir?"

"I was just thinking about Hellman," said the Captain. "Back on Earth now, Hellman the cynic."

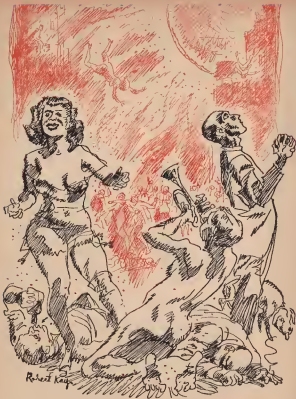
A year from now, he could see Hellman standing in his penthouse apartment, drinking a quiet drink, laughing to his friends.

"Do you see this planet labeled Planet 4 in Star System 70?" Click. "I turn it off like a light. Do you see this rocket, this tiny model no bigger than a seed, numbered A-1000? See, I toss it into the waste-basket." A wave of the hand. The tinkle of the tiny rocket in the trash-bin. "What did I tell you, friends? They'll never come back. They're dead. It's a horrid planet. They're tortured and broken and dead. Oh, I warned them. Space travel! We'll never see them again, poor idiots!"

Forester increased his stride. Among his men, he found his place. They walked down away from the green forest, talking quietly, with the silvery rocket glowing in the moonlight behind them, and all of the fresh planet around them, a wine creek flowing for them, baked fish tolling in the hot-water springs, fruit ripening in the night trees, and distant forests and lakes waiting for them to happen by. They walked off across the endless green lawns, beyond the forest, near the six white stones, to the edge of the river.

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THE first record of a meteorite display was made by Andrew Ellicott on November 12, 1799. He wrote in his journal: "The whole heaven appeared as if illuminated with sky rockets, flying in an infinity of directions, and I was in constant expectation of some of them falling on the vessel. They continued until put out by the light of the sun after day break."



# The Last Day

By RICHARD MATHESON

*This, we might as well warn you, is what Hollywood calls a downbeat story. Not that we're especially fond of them ourselves; but every so often such a yarn will point out a truth too often overlooked.*

*Also, they are tricky to write. Too much accent on pure despair and the reader walks out long before the end. There must be in the people of such a story an undistorted reflection of us all: a common denominator anyone can recognize within himself.*

*Waxing philosophical is like waxing a floor; it is powerful easy to fall on your face while trying it. But we have an abiding faith in Man's ability to rise to greatness in the shadow of destruction. Evidently Dick Matheson feels much the same way, for his handling of character in *The Last Day* is masterful in its sympathetic portrayal of the best and the worst in all of us.*

HE WOKE UP and the first thing he thought was:  
*the last night is gone.*

He had slept through half of it.

He lay there on the floor and looked up at the ceiling. The walls still glowed reddish from the outside light. There was no sound in the living room but that of snoring.

He looked around. There were bodies sprawled all over the room. On the couch, slumped on chairs, curled up on the floor.

He raised up on one elbow and winced at the shooting pains in his head. He closed his eyes and held them

tightly shut for a moment. Then he opened them again. He ran his tongue over the inside of his dry mouth. There was still a stale taste of liquor and food in his mouth.

He rested on his elbow as he looked around the room again, his mind slowly registering the scene.

Nancy and Bill lying in each other's arms, both naked. Norman curled up in an arm chair, his thin face taut as he slept. Mort and Mel lying on the floor, covered with dirty throw rugs. Both snoring. Others on the floor.

Outside the red glow.

He looked at the window and his throat moved. He blinked. He looked down over his long body. He swallowed again.

I'm alive, he thought, and it's all true.

He rubbed his eyes. He took a deep breath of the dead air in the apartment.

He knocked over a glass as he struggled to his feet. The liquor and soda sloshed over the rug and soaked into the dark blue weave.

He looked around at the other glasses, broken, kicked over, hurled against the wall. He looked at the bottles all over, all empty.

He stood staring around the room. He looked at the record player overturned, the albums all strewn around, jagged pieces of records in crazy patterns on the rug.

He remembered.

It was Mort who had started it the night before. Mort who had suddenly rushed to the playing record machine and shouted drunkenly, "What the hell is music any more! Just a lot of noise!"

And he had driven the point of his shoe against the front of the record player and knocked it against the wall. He had lurched over and down on his knees. He had struggled up with the player in his beefy arms and heaved the entire thing over on its back and kicked it again.

"The hell with music!" Mort had yelled. "I hate the crap anyway!"

Then he'd started to drag records out of their albums and their envelopes and snap them over his kneecap.

"Come on!" he'd yelled to everybody. "Come on!"

And it had caught on. The way all crazy ideas had caught on in those last few days.

Mel had jumped up from making love to a girl. He had flung records out the windows, scaling them far across the street. And Charlie had put aside his gun for a moment to stand at the windows too and try to hit people in the street with the records.

Richard had watched the dark saucers bounce and shatter on the sidewalks below. He'd even thrown one himself. Then he'd just turned

away and let the others rage. He'd taken Mel's girl into the bedroom and for a few moments they forgot what was happening to their world.

He thought about that as he stood waveringly in the reddish light of the room.

He closed his eyes a moment.

Then he looked at Nancy and remembered taking her too sometime in the jumble of wild hours that had been yesterday and last night.

She looked vile now, he thought. She'd always been an animal. Before, though, she'd had to veil it. Now, in the final twilight of everything, she could revel in the only thing she'd ever really cared about.

He wondered if there were any people left in the world with real dignity. The kind that was still there when it no longer was necessary to impress people with it.

He stepped over the body of a sleeping girl. She had on only a slip. He looked down at her tangled hair, at her smeared red lips, at the tight, unhappy frown printed on her face.

He glanced into the bedroom as he passed it. There were three girls and two men in the bed.

He found the body in the bathroom.

It was thrown carelessly in the tub and the shower curtain torn down to cover it. Only the legs

showed, dangling ridiculously over the front rim of the tub.

He drew back the curtain and looked at the blood-soaked shirt, at the white, still face.

Charlie.

He shook his head, then turned away and washed his face and hands at the sink. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. As a matter of fact, Charlie was one of the lucky ones now. A member of the legion who had put their heads into ovens, or cut their wrists or taken pills or done away with themselves in the accepted fashions of suicide.

As he looked at his tired face in the mirror he thought of cutting his wrists. But he knew he couldn't. Because it took more than just despair to incite self-destruction.

He took a drink of water. Lucky, he thought, there's still water running. He didn't suppose there was a soul left to run the water system. Or the electric system or the gas system or the telephone system or any system for that matter.

What fool would work on the last day of the world?

Spencer was in the kitchen when Richard went in.

He was sitting in his shorts at the table looking at his hands. On the stove some eggs were frying. The gas must still be working then too, Richard thought.



"Hello," he said to Spencer.

Spencer grunted without looking up. He stared at his hands. Richard let it go. He turned the gas down a little. He took bread out of the cupboard and put it in the electric toaster. But the toaster didn't work. He shrugged and forgot about it.

"What time is it?" Spencer was looking at him with the question. Richard looked at his watch. "It stopped," he said.

They looked at each other.

"Oh," Spencer said. Then he asked, "What day is it?"

Richard thought. "Sunday, I think," he said.

"I wonder if people are at church," Spencer said.

"Who cares?"

Richard opened the refrigerator.

"There aren't any more eggs," Spencer said.

Richard shut the door. "No more eggs," he said dully, "No more chickens. No more anything."

He leaned against the wall with a shuddering breath and looked out the window at the red sky.

Mary, he thought. Mary, who I should have married. Who I let go. He wondered where she was. He wondered if she were thinking about him at all.

Norman came trudging in, groggy with sleep and hangover. His mouth hung open. He looked dazed.

"Morning," he slurred.

"Good morning, merry sunshine," Richard said, without mirth.

Norman looked at him blankly. Then he went over to the sink and washed out his mouth. He spit the water down the drain.

"Charlie's dead," he said.

"I know," Richard said.

"Oh. When did it happen?"

"Last night," Richard told him.

"You were unconscious. You remember how he kept saying he was going to shoot us all? Put us out of our misery?"

"Yeah," Norman said. "He put the muzzle against my head. He said feel how cool it is."

"Well, he got in a fight with Mort," Richard said. "The gun went off." He shrugged. "That was it."

They looked at each other without expression.

Then Norman turned his head and looked out the window. "It's still up there," he muttered.

They looked up at the great flaming ball in the sky that crowded out the sun, the moon, the stars.

Norman turned away, his throat moving. His lips trembled and he clamped them together. "Jesus," he said. "It's *today*."

He looked up at the sky again. "Today," he repeated. "*Everything*."

"Everything," said Richard.

Spencer got up and turned off the gas. He looked down at the

eggs for a moment. Then he said, "What the hell did I fry these for?"

He dumped them into the sink and they slid greasily over the white surface. The yolks burst and spurted smoking, yellow fluid over the enamel.

Spencer bit his lips. His face grew hard. "I'm taking her again," he said suddenly.

He pushed past Richard and dropped his shorts off as he turned the corner into the hallway.

"There goes Spencer," Richard said.

Norman sat down at the table. Richard stayed at the wall.

In the living room they heard Nancy suddenly call out at the top of her strident voice: "Hey, wake up, everybody! Watch me do it! Watch me, everybody, *watch me!*"

Norman looked at the kitchen doorway for a moment. Then something gave inside of him and he slumped his head forward on his arms on the table. His thin shoulders shook.

"I did it too," he said brokenly. "I did it too. Oh God, what did I come here for?"

"Sex," Richard said. "Like all the rest of us. You thought you could end your life in carnal, drunken bliss."

Norman's voice was muffled. "I can't die like that," he sobbed. "I can't."

"A couple of billion people are doing it," Richard said. "When the sun hits us, they'll still be at it. What a sight."

The thought of a world's people indulging themselves in one last orgy of animalism made him shudder. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the wall and tried to forget.

But the wall was warm.

Norman looked up from the table. "Let's go home," he said.

Richard looked at him. "Home?" he said.

"To our parents. My mother and father. Your mother."

Richard shook his head. "I don't want to," he said.

"But I can't go alone."

"Why?"

"Because . . . I can't. You know how the streets are full of guys just *killing* everybody they meet."

Richard shrugged.

"Why won't you?" Norman asked.

"I don't want to see her."

"Your mother?"

"Yes."

"You're crazy," Norman said.

"Who else is there to . . ."

"No."

He thought of his mother at home waiting for him. Waiting for him on the last day. And it made him ill to think of delaying, of maybe never seeing her again.

But he kept thinking: how can I go home and have her try to

make me pray? Try to make me read from the Bible, spend these last hours in a muddle of religious absorption?

He said it again for himself. "No."

Norman looked lost. His chest shook with a swallowed sob. "I want to see my mother," he said.

"Go ahead," Richard said casually.

But his insides were twisting themselves into knots. To never see her again. Or his sister and her husband and her daughter.

Never to see any of them again.

He sighed. It was no use fighting it. In spite of everything, Norman was right. Who else was there in the world to turn to? In a wide world about to be burned, was there any other person who loved him above all others?

"Oh . . . all right," he said. "Come on. Anything to get out of this place."

The apartment house hall smelled of vomit. They found the janitor dead drunk on the stairs. They found a dog in the foyer with its head kicked in.

They stopped as they came out the entrance of the building.

Instinctively, they looked up.

At the red sky, like molten slag. At the fiery wisps that fell like hot rain drops through the atmosphere. At the gigantic ball of flame that kept coming closer and closer, that blotted out the universe.

They lowered their watering eyes. It hurt to look. They started walking along the street. It was very warm.

"December," Richard said. "It's like the tropics."

As they walked along in silence he thought of the tropics, of the poles, of all the world's countries he would never see. Of all the things he would never do.

Like hold Mary in his arms and tell her, as the world was ending, that he loved her very much and was not afraid.

"Never," he said, feeling himself go rigid with frustration.

"What?" Norman said.

"Nothing. Nothing."

As they walked Richard felt something heavy in his jacket pocket. It bumped against his side. He reached in and drew out the object.

"What's that?" Norman asked.

"Charlie's gun," Richard said. "I took it last night so nobody else would get hurt."

His laughter was harsh. "So nobody else would get hurt," he said bitterly. "Jesus, I ought to be on the stage."

He was about to throw it away when he changed his mind. He slid it back into his pocket.

"I may need it," he said.

Norman wasn't listening. "Thank God nobody stole my car. Oh —!"

Somebody had thrown a rock through the windshield.

"What's the difference?" Richard said.

"I . . . none, I suppose."

They got into the front seat and brushed the glass off the cushion. It was stuffy in the car. Richard pulled off his jacket and threw it out. He put the gun in his side pants pocket.

As Norman drove downtown they passed people in the street.

Some were running around wildly, as if they were searching for something. Others were fighting. Strewn all over the sidewalks were bodies of people who had leaped from windows and been struck down by speeding cars. Buildings were on fire, windows shattered from the explosions of unlit gas jets.

There were people looting stores.

"What's the matter with them?"

Norman asked miserably. "Is that how they want to spend their last day?"

"Maybe that's how they spent their whole life," Richard answered.

He leaned against the door and gazed at the people they passed. Some of them waved at him. Some cursed and spat. A few threw things at the speeding car.

"People die the way they lived," he said. "Some good, some bad."

"Look out!" Norman cried out as a car came careening down the street on the wrong side. Men and women hung out of the window

shouting and singing and waving bottles.

Norman twisted the wheel violently and they missed the car by inches.

"Are they crazy?" he said.

Richard looked out through the back window. He saw the car skid, saw it get out of control and go crashing into a store front and turn over on its side, the wheels spinning crazily.

He turned back without speaking. Norman kept looking ahead grimly, his hands on the wheel, white and tense.

Another intersection.

A car came speeding across their path. Norman jammed on the brakes with a gasp. They crashed against the dashboard, getting their breath knocked out.

Then, before Norman could get the car started again, a gang of teen-age boys with knives and clubs came dashing into the intersection. They'd been chasing the other car. Now they changed direction and flung themselves at the car that held Norman and Richard.

Norman threw the car into first and gunned across the street.

A boy jumped on the back of the car. Another tried for the running board, missed and went spinning over the street. Another jumped on the running board and grabbed the door handle. He slashed at Richard with a knife.

"Gonna kill ya bastids!" yelled the boy. "Sonsabitches!"

He slashed again and tore open the back of the seat as Richard jerked his shoulder to the side.

"Get out of here!" Norman screamed, trying to watch the boy and the street ahead at the same time.

The boy tried to open the door as the car wove wildly down Broadway. He slashed again but the car's motion made him miss.

"I'll get ya!" he screamed in a fury of brainless hate.

Richard tried to open the door and knock the boy off, but he couldn't. The boy's twisted white face thrust in through the window. He raised his knife.

Richard had the gun now. He shot the boy in the face.

The boy flung back from the car with a dying howl and landed like a sack of rocks. He bounced once, his left leg kicked and then he lay still.

Richard twisted around.

The boy on the back was still hanging on, his crazed face pressed against the back window. Richard saw his mouth moving as the boy cursed.

"Shake him off!" he said.

Norman headed for the sidewalk, then suddenly veered back into the street. The boy hung on. Norman did it again. The boy still clung to the back.

Then on the third time he lost his grip and went off. He tried to

run along the street but his momentum was too great and he went leaping over the curb and crashing into a plate glass window, arms stuck up in front of him to ward off the blow.

They sat in the car, breathing heavily. They didn't talk for a long while. Richard flung the gun out the window and watched it clatter on the concrete and bounce off a hydrant. Norman started to say something about it, then stopped.

The car turned into Fifth Avenue and started downtown at sixty miles an hour. There weren't many cars.

They passed churches. People were packed inside them. They overflowed out onto the steps.

"Poor fools," Richard muttered, his hands still shaking.

Norman took a deep breath. "I wish I was a poor fool," he said. "A poor fool who could believe in something."

"Maybe," Richard said. Then he added, "I'd rather spend the last day believing what I think is true."

"The last day," Norman said. "I . . ." He shook his head. "I can't believe it," he said. "I read the papers. I see that . . . that *thing* up there. I know it's going to happen. But God! The *end*?"

He looked at Richard for a split second. "Nothing afterward?"

Richard said, "I don't know."

At 14th Street Norman drove

to the East side, then sped across the Manhattan Bridge. He didn't stop for anything, driving around bodies and wrecked cars. Once he drove over a body and Richard saw his face twitch as the wheel rolled over the dead man's leg.

"They're all lucky," Richard said. "Luckier than we are."

They stopped in front of Norman's house in Brooklyn. Some kids were playing ball in the street. They didn't seem to realize what was happening. Their shouts sounded very loud in the silent street. Richard wondered if their parents knew where the children were. Or cared.

Norman was looking at him. "Well . . . ?" he started to say.

Richard felt his stomach muscles tightening. He couldn't answer.

"Would you . . . like to come in for a minute?" Norman asked.

Richard shook his head. "No," he said. "I hetter get home. I' . . . should see her. My mother, I mean."

"Oh." Norman nodded. Then he straightened up. He forced a momentary calm over himself. "For what it's worth, Dick," he said, "I consider you my best friend and . . ."

He faltered. He reached out and gripped Richard's hand. Then he pushed out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition.

"So long," he said hurriedly.

Richard watched his friend run

around the car and move for the apartment house. When he had almost reached the door, Richard called out: "Norm!"

Norman stopped and turned. The two of them looked at each other. All the years they had known each other seemed to flicker between them.

Then Richard managed to smile. He touched his forehead in a last salute.

"So long, Norm," he said.

Norman didn't smile. He pushed through the door and was gone.

Richard looked at the door for a long time. He started the motor. Then he turned it off again thinking that Norman's parents might not be home.

After a while he started it again and began the trip home.

As he drove he kept thinking.

The closer he got to the end, the less he wanted to face it. He wanted to end it now. Before the hysterics started.

Sleeping pills, he decided. It was the best way. He had some at home. He hoped there were enough left. There might not be any left in the corner drug store. There'd been a rush for sleeping pills during those last few days. Entire families took them together.

He reached the house without event. Overhead the sky was an incandescent crimson. He felt the heat on his face like waves from a distant oven. He breathed in the

heated air, his lungs cringing.

He unlocked the front door and walked in slowly.

I'll probably find her in the front room, he thought. Surrounded by her books, praying, exhorting invisible powers to succor her as the world prepared to fry itself.

She wasn't in the front room.

He searched the house. And, as he did, his heart began to beat quickly, and when he knew she really wasn't there he felt a great hollow feeling in his stomach. He knew that his talk about not wanting to see her had been just talk. He loved her. And she was the only one left now.

He searched for a note in her room, in his, in the living room.

"Mom," he said. "Mom, where are you?"

He found the note in the kitchen. He picked it up from the table:

*Richard darling,  
I'm at your sister's  
house. Please come there.  
Don't make me spend  
the last day without you.  
Don't make me leave this  
world without seeing your  
dear face again. Please.*

The last day.

There it was in black and white. And, of all people, it had been his mother to write down the words. She who had always been so skeptical of his taste for material science. Now admitting the reali-

ty of science's last prediction.

Because she couldn't doubt any more. Because the sky was filled with flaming evidence and no one could doubt any more.

The whole world going. The staggering detail of evolutions and revolutions, of strifes and clashes, of endless continuities of centuries streaming back into the clouded past, of rocks and trees and animals and men. All to pass. In a flash, in a moment. The pride, the vanity of man's world incinerated by a freak of astronomical disorder.

What point was there to all of it, then? None, none at all. Because it was all ending.

He got sleeping pills from the medicine cabinet and left. He drove to his sister's house thinking about his mother as he passed through the streets littered with everything from empty bottles to dead people.

If only he didn't dread the thought of arguing with his mother on this last day. Of disputing with her about her God and her conviction.

He made up his mind not to argue. He'd force himself to make their last day a peaceful one. He would accept her simple devotion and not hack at her faith any more.

The front door was locked at Grace's house. He rang the bell and, after a moment, heard hurried steps inside.

He heard Ray shout inside, "Don't open it, Mom! It may be that gang again!"

"It's Richard, I know it is!" his mother called back.

Then the door was open and she was embracing him and crying happily.

He didn't speak at first. Finally he said softly, "Hello, Mom."

His niece Doris played all afternoon in the front room while Grace and Ray sat motionless in the living room looking at her.

If I were with Mary, Richard kept thinking. If only we were together today. Then he thought that they might have had children. And he would have had to sit like Grace and know that the few years his child had lived would be its only years.

The sky grew brighter as evening approached. It flowed with violent crimson currents. Doris stood quietly at the window and looked at it. She hadn't laughed all day or cried. And Richard thought to himself, she *knows*.

And thought too that at any moment his mother would ask them all to pray together. To sit and read the Bible and hope for divine charity.

But she didn't say anything. She smiled. She made supper. Richard stood with her in the kitchen as she made supper.

"I may not wait," he told her. "I . . . may take sleeping pills."

"Are you afraid, son?" she asked.

"Everybody is afraid," he said.

She shook her head. "Not everybody," she said.

Now, he thought, it's coming. That smug look, the opening line.

She gave him a dish with the vegetable and they all sat down to eat.

During supper none of them spoke except to ask for food. Doris never spoke once. Richard sat looking at her from across the table.

He thought about the night before. The crazy drinking, the fighting, the carnal abuses. He thought of Charlie dead in the bathtub. Of the apartment in Manhattan. Of Spencer driving himself into a frenzy of lust as the climax to his life. Of the boy lying dead in the New York gutter with a bullet in his brain.

They all seemed very far away. He could almost believe it had all never happened. Could almost believe that this was just another evening meal with his family.

Except for the cherry glow that filled the sky and flooded in through the windows like an aura from some fantastic fireplace.

Near the end of the meal Grace went and got a box. She sat down at the table with it and opened it. She took out white pills. Doris looked at her, her large eyes searching.



"This is dessert," Grace told her. "We're all going to have white candy for dessert."

"Is it peppermint?" Doris asked quietly.

"Yes," Grace said. "It's peppermint."

Richard felt his scalp crawling as Grace put pills in front of Doris. In front of Ray.

"We haven't enough for all of us," she said to Richard.

"I have my own," he said.

"Have you enough for Mom?" she asked.

"I won't need any," her mother said.

In his tenseness Richard almost shouted at her. Shouted stop being so damned noble! But he held himself. He stared in fascinated horror at Doris holding the pills in her small hand.

"This isn't peppermint," she said. "Momma, this isn't —"

"*Yes it is.*" Grace took a deep breath. "Eat it, darling."

Doris put one in her mouth. She made a face. Then she spit it into her palm. "It *isn't* peppermint," she said, upset.

Grace threw up her hand and dug her teeth in the white knuckles. Her eyes moved frantically to Ray.

"Eat it, Doris," Ray said. "Eat it, it's good."

Doris started to cry. "No, I don't like it."

"*Eat it!*"

Ray turned away suddenly, his

body shaking. Richard tried to think of some way to make her eat the pills, but he couldn't.

Then his mother spoke. "We'll play a game, Doris," she said. "We'll see if you can swallow all the candy before I count ten. If you do, I'll give you a dollar."

Doris sniffed. "A dollar?" she said.

Richard's mother nodded. "One," she said.

Doris didn't move.

"Two," said Richard's mother. "A dollar . . ."

Doris brushed aside a tear. "A . . . whole dollar?"

"Yes, darling. Three, four, hurry up."

Doris reached for the pills.

"Five . . . six . . . seven . . ."

Grace had her eyes shut tightly. Her cheeks were white.

"Nine . . . ten . . ."

Richard's mother smiled, but her lips trembled and there was a glistening in her eyes. "There," she said cheerfully. "You've won the game."

Grace suddenly put pills into her mouth and swallowed them in fast succession. She looked at Ray. He reached out one trembling hand and swallowed his pills. Richard put his hand in his pocket for his pills but took it out again. He didn't want his mother to watch him take them.

Doris got sleepy—almost immediately. She yawned and couldn't

keep her eyes open. Ray picked her up and she rested against his shoulder, her small arms around his neck. Grace got up and the three of them went back into the bedroom.

Richard sat there while his mother went back and said good-bye to them. He sat staring at the white tablecloth, at the remains of food.

When his mother came back she smiled at him. "Help me with the dishes," she said.

"The . . .?" he started. Then

he stopped. What difference did it make what they did?

He stood with her in the red-lit kitchen feeling a sense of sharp unreality as he dried the dishes they would never use again and put them in the closet that would be no more in a matter of hours.

He kept thinking about Ray and Grace in the bedroom. Finally he left the kitchen without a word and went back. He opened the door and looked in. He looked at the three of them for a long time. Then he shut the door again and



"Lathrop, I'll have to ask you to stick with the rest of the party."

walked slowly back to the kitchen. He stared at his mother.

"They're . . ."

"All right," his mother said.

"Why didn't you say anything to them?" he asked her. "How come you let them do it without saying anything?"

"Richard," she said, "everyone has to make his own way on this day. No one can tell others what to do. Doris was *their* child."

"And I'm yours. . . ."

"You're not a child any longer," she said.

He finished up the dishes, his fingers numb and shaking. "Mom, about last night . . ." he started.

"I don't care about it."

"But . . ."

"It doesn't matter," she said.

"This part is ending."

Now, he thought, almost with pain. *This part.* Now she would talk about afterlife and heaven and reward for the just and eternal penitence for the sinning.

She said, "Let's go out and sit on the porch."

He didn't understand. He walked through the quiet house with her. He sat next to her on the porch steps and thought: I'll never see Grace again. Or Doris. Or Norman or Spencer or Mary.

He couldn't take it all in. It was too much. All he could do was sit there woodenly and look at the red sky and the huge sun about to swallow them. He couldn't even feel nervous any more. Fears were

blunted by endless repetition.

"Mom," he said after a while, "why . . . why haven't you spoken about religion to me? I know you must want to."

She looked at him and her face was very gentle in the red glow. "I don't have to, darling," she said. "I know we'll be together when this is over. You don't have to believe it. I'll believe for both of us."

And that was all. He looked at her, wordless before her confidence.

"If you want to take those pills now," she said, "it's all right. You can go to sleep in my lap."

He felt himself tremble. "You wouldn't mind?"

"I want you to do what you think is best."

He didn't know what to do until he thought of her sitting there alone when the world ended.

"I'll stay with you," he said.

She smiled. "If you change your mind," she said, "you can tell me."

They were quiet for a while. Then she said, "It is pretty."

"*Pretty?*" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "God closes a bright curtain on our play."

He didn't know. But he put his arm around her shoulders and she leaned against him. And he did know *one* thing.

They sat there in the evening of the last day. And, though there was no actual point to it, they loved each other.



# THE INVADERS

By MURRAY LEINSTER

*It started in Greece on the day after tomorrow. Before the last act raced to a close, Coburn was buried to his ears in assorted adventures, including a revolution and an invasion from outer space!*

*We're not given to throwing around the word "epic" lightly, but here is one! Swashbuckling action, a great many vivid characters, and a weird mystery — all spun for you by one of the master story-tellers of our time.*

ON a certain day — it may be in the history books eventually — Coburn was in the village of Ardea, north of Salonika in the most rugged part of Greece. He was making a survey for purposes which later on turned out not to

matter much. The village of Ardea was small, it was very early in the morning, and he was trying to get his car started when he heard the yell.

It was a shrill yell, and it traveled fast. Coburn jerked his head

upright from the hood of the car. A whiskered villager with flapping trousers came pounding up the single street. His eyes were panic-stricken and his mouth was wide. He emitted the yell in a long, sustained note. Other villagers popped into view like ants from a disturbed ant-hill. Some instantly ran back into their houses. Others began to run toward the outskirts of the village, toward the south.

Coburn, watching blankly, found himself astonished at the number of people the village contained. He hadn't dreamed it was so populous. All were in instant frenzied flight toward the mountains. An old woman he'd seen barely hobbling, now ran like a deer. Children toddled desperately. Adults snatched them up and ran. Larger children fled on twinkling legs. The inhabitants of Ardea vanished toward the hills in a straggling, racing, panting stream. They disappeared around an outcrop of stone which was merely the nearest place that would hide them. Then there was silence.

Coburn turned his head blankly in the direction from which they had run. He saw the mountains — incredibly stony and barren. That was all. No, not quite — there was something far away which was subtly different in color from the hillsides. It moved. It flowed over a hill crest, coming plainly from somewhere beyond the moun-

tains. It was vague in shape. Coburn felt a momentary stirring of superstition. There simply couldn't be anything so huge. . . .

But there could. There was. It was a column of soldiers in uniforms that looked dark-gray at this distance. It flowed slowly out of the mountains like a colossal snake — some Midgard monster or river of destruction. It moved with an awful, deliberate steadiness toward the village of Ardea.

Coburn caught his breath. Then he was running too. He was out of the village almost before he realized it. He did not try to follow the villagers. He might lead pursuers after them. There was a narrow defile nearby. Tanks could hardly follow it, and it did not lead where they would be going. He plunged into it and was instantly hidden. He pelted on. It was a trail from somewhere, because he saw ancient donkey-droppings on the stones, but he did not know where it led. He simply ran to get away from the village and the soldiers who were coming toward it.

This was Greece. They were Bulgarian soldiers. This was not war or even invasion. This was worse — a cold-war raid. He kept running and presently rocky cliffs overhung him on one side, a vast expanse of sky loomed to his left. He found himself panting. He began to hope that he was actually safe.

Then he heard a voice. It sounded vexed. Quite incredibly, it was talking English. "But my dear young lady!" it said severely. "You simply mustn't go on! There's the very devil of a mess turning up, and you mustn't run into it!"

A girl's voice answered, also in English. "I'm sure — I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I'm afraid I can't explain. But, truly, you mustn't go on to the village!"

Coburn pushed ahead. He came upon the people who had spoken. There was a girl riding on a donkey. She was American. Trim. Neat. Uneasy, but reasonably self-confident. And there was a man standing by the trail, with a slide of earth behind him and mud on his boots as if he'd slid down somewhere very fast to intercept this girl. He wore the distinctive costume a British correspondent is apt to affect in the wilds.

They turned as Coburn came into view. The girl goggled at him. He was not exactly the sort of third person one expected to find on a very lonely, ill-defined rocky trail many miles north of Salonika.

When they turned to him, Coburn recognized the man. He'd met Dillon once or twice in Salonika. He panted: "Dillon! There's a column of soldiers headed across the border! Bulgarians!"

"How close?" asked Dillon.

"They're coming," said Coburn, with some difficulty due to lack of breath. "I saw them across the valley. Everybody's run away from the village. I was the last one out."

Dillon nodded composedly. He looked intently at Coburn. "You know me," he said reservedly. "Should I remember you?"

"I've met you once or twice," Coburn told him. "In Salonika."

"Oh," said Dillon. "Oh, yes. Sorry. I've got some cameras up yonder. I want a picture or two of those Bulgarians. See if you can persuade this young lady not to go on. I fancy it's safe enough here. Not a normal raid route through this pass."

Coburn nodded. Dillon expected the raid, evidently. This sort of thing had happened in Turkey. Now it would start up here, in Greece. The soldiers would strike fast and far, at first. They wouldn't stop to hunt down the local inhabitants. Not yet.

"We'll wait," said Coburn. "You'll be back?"

"Oh, surely!" said Dillon. "Five minutes or less."

He started up the precipitous wall, at whose bottom he had slid down. He climbed remarkably well. He went up hand-over-hand despite the steepness of the stone. It looked almost impossible, but Dillon apparently found hand-grips by instinct, as a good climber does. In a matter of min-



utes he vanished, some fifty feet up, behind a bulging mass of stone. He did not reappear.

Coburn began to get his breath back. The girl looked at him, her forehead creased.

"Just to make sure," said Coburn, "I'll see if I can get a view back down the trail."

Where the vastness of the sky showed, he might be able to look down. He scrambled up a barrier two man-heights high. There was a screen of straggly brush, with emptiness beyond. He peered.

He could see a long way down and behind, and actually the village was clearly in sight from here.

There were rumbling, caterpillar-tread tanks in the act of entering it. There were anachronistic mounted men with them. Cavalry is outdated, nowadays, but in rocky mountain country they can have uses where tanks can't go. But here tanks and cavalry looked grim. Coburn squirmed back and beckoned to the girl. She joined him. They peered through the brushwood together.

The light tanks were scurrying along the single village street. Horsemen raced here and there. A pig squealed. There was a shot. The tanks emerged from the other side. They went crawling swiftly toward the south. But they did



not turn aside where the villagers had. They headed along the way Coburn had driven to Ardea.

Infantrymen appeared, marching into the village. An advance party, rifles ready. This was strict discipline and standard military practise. Horsemen rode to tell them that all was quiet. They turned and spurred away after the tanks.

The girl said in a strained voice. "This is war starting! Invasion!"

Coburn said coldly, "No. No planes. This isn't war. It's a training exercise, Iron-Curtain style. This outfit will strike twenty — maybe thirty miles south. There's a town there — Kilkis. They'll

take it and loot it. By the time Athens finds out what's happened, they'll be ready to fall back. They'll do a little fighting. They'll carry off the people. And they'll deny everything. The West doesn't want war. Greece couldn't fight by herself. And America wouldn't believe that such things could happen. But they do. It's what's called cold war. Ever hear of that?"

The main column of soldiers far below poured up to the village and went down the straggly street in a tide of dark figures. The village was very small. The soldiers came out of the other end of the village. They poured on after the



tanks, rippling over irregularities in the way. They seemed innumerable.

"Three or four thousand men," said Coburn coldly. "This is a big raid. But it's not war. Not yet."

It was not the time for full-scale war. Bulgaria and the other countries in its satellite status were under orders to put a strain upon the outside world. They were building up border incidents and turmoil for the benefit of their masters. Turkey was on a war footing, after a number of incidents like this. Indo-China was at war. Korea was an old story. Now Greece. It always takes more men to guard against criminal actions than to commit them. When this raid was over Greece would have to maintain a full-size army in its northern mountains to guard against its repetition. Which would be a strain on its treasury and might help toward bankruptcy. This was cold war.

The infantry ended. Horse-drawn vehicles appeared in a seemingly endless line. Motorized transport would be better, but the Bulgarians were short of it. Shaggy, stubby animals plodded in the wake of the tanks and the infantry. There were two-wheeled carts in single file all across the valley. They went through the village and filed after the soldiers.

"I think," said Coburn in biting anger, "this will be all there is to see. They'll go in until they're

stopped. They'll kidnap Greek civilians and later work them to death in labor camps. They'll carry off some children to raise as spies. But their purpose is probably only to make such a threat that the Greeks will go broke guarding against them. They know the Greeks don't want war."

He began to wriggle back from the brushwood screen. He was filled with the sort of sick rage that comes when you can't actively resent insolence and arrogance. He hated the people who wanted the world to collapse, and this was part of their effort to bring it about.

He helped the girl down. "Dillon said to wait," he said. He found himself shaking with anger at the men who had ordered the troops to march. "He said he was taking pictures. He must have had an advance tip of some sort. If so, he'll have a line of retreat."

Then Coburn frowned. Not quite plausible, come to think of it. But Dillon had certainly known about the raid. He was set to take pictures, and he hadn't been surprised. One would have expected Greek Army photographers on hand to take pictures of a raid of which they had warning. Probably United Nations observers on the scene, too. Yes. There should be Army men and probably a United Nations team up where Dillon was.

Coburn explained to the girl.

"That'll be it. And they'll have a radio, too. Probably helicopters taking them out also. I'll go up and tell them to be sure and have room for you."

He started for the cliff he'd seen Dillon climb. He paused: "I'd better have your name for them to report to Athens."

"I'm Janice Ames," she told him. "The Breen Foundation has me going around arranging for lessons for the people up here. Sanitation and nutrition and midwifery, and so on. The Foundation office is in Salonika, though."

He nodded and attacked the cliff.

It hadn't been a difficult climb for Dillon. It wasn't even a long one for Coburn, but it was much worse than he'd thought. The crevices for handholds were rare, and footholds were almost nonexistent. There were times when he felt he was holding on by his fingernails. Dillon seemed to have made it with perfect ease, but Coburn found it exhausting.

Fifty feet up he came to the place where Dillon had vanished. But it was a preposterously difficult task to get across an undercut to where he could grasp a stunted tree. It was a strain to scramble up past it. Then he found himself on the narrowest of possible ledges, with a sickening drop off to one side. But Dillon had made it, so he followed.

He went a hundred yards, and then the ledge came to an end. He saw where Dillon must have climbed. It was possible, but Coburn violently did not want to try. Still . . . He started.

Then something clicked in his throat. There was a rather deep ledge for a space of four or five feet. And there was Dillon. No, not Dillon. Just Dillon's clothes. They lay flat and deflated, but laid out in one assembly beside a starveling twisted bush. It would have been possible for a man to stand there to take off his clothes, if he wanted to. But a man who takes off his clothes — and why should Dillon do that? — takes them off one by one. These garments were fitted together. The coat was over the shirt, and the trousers fitted to the bottom of the shirt over the coat, and the boots were at the ends of the trouser legs.

Then Coburn saw something he did not believe. It palpably was not true. He saw a hand sticking out of the end of the sleeve. But it was not a hand, because it had collapsed. It was rather like an unusually thick glove, flesh color.

Then he saw what should have been Dillon's head. And it was in place, too. But it was not Dillon's head. It was not a head at all. It was something quite different. There were no eyes. Merely holes. Openings. Like a mask.

Coburn felt a sort of roaring in

his ears, and he could not think clearly for a moment because of the shrieking impossibility of what he was looking at. Dillon's necktie had been very neatly untied, and left in place in his collar. His shirt had been precisely unbuttoned. He had plainly done it himself. And then — the unbuttoned shirt made it clear — he had come out of his body. Physically, he had emerged and gone on. The thing lying flat that had lapsed at Coburn's feet was Dillon's outside. His outside only. The inside had come out and gone away. It had climbed the cliff over Coburn's head.

The outside of Dillon looked remarkably like something made out of foam-rubber. Coburn touched it, insanely.

He heard his own voice saying flatly: "It's a sort of suit. A suit that looks like Dillon. He was in it. Something was! Something is playing the part of Dillon. Maybe it always was. Maybe there isn't any Dillon."

He felt a sort of hysterical composure. He opened the chest. It was patently artificial. There were such details on the inside as would be imagined in a container needed to fit something snugly. At the edges of the opening there were fastenings like the teeth of a zipper, but somehow different. Coburn knew that when this was fastened there would be no visible seam.

Whatever wore this suit-that-looked-like-Dillon could feel perfectly confident of passing for Dillon, clothed or otherwise. It could pass without any question for — Coburn gagged.

*It could pass without question for a human being.*

Obviously, whatever was wearing this foam-rubber replica of Dillon was not human!

Coburn went back to where he had to climb down the cliffside again. He moved like a sleep-walker. He descended the fifty-foot cliff by the crevices and the single protruding rock-point that had helped him get up. It was much easier going down. In his state of mind it was also more dangerous. He moved in a sort of robot-like composure.

He moved toward the girl, trying to make words come out of his throat, when a small rock came clattering down the cliff. He looked up. Dillon was in the act of swinging to the first part of the descent. He came down, very confident and assured. He had two camera-cases slung from his shoulders. Coburn stared at him, utterly unable to believe what he'd seen ten minutes before.

Dillon reached solid ground and turned. He smiled wryly. His shirt was buttoned. His tie was tied.

"I hoped," he said ruefully to Janice Ames, "that the Bulgars would toddle off. But they left a

guard in the village. We can't hope to take an easier trail. We'll have to go back the way you came. We'll get you safe to Salonika, though."

The girl smiled, uneasily but gratefully.

"And," added Dillon, "we'd better get started."

He gallantly helped the girl remount her donkey. At the sight, Coburn was shaken out of his numbness. He moved fiercely to intervene. But Janice settled herself in the saddle and Dillon confidently led the way. Coburn grimly walked beside her as she rode. He was convinced that he wouldn't leave her side while Dillon was around. But even as he knew that desperate certitude, he was filled with confusion and a panicky uncertainty.

When they'd traveled about half a mile, another frightening thought occurred to Coburn. Perhaps Dillon — passing for human — wasn't alone. Perhaps there were thousands like him.

Invaders! Usurpers, pretending to be men. Invaders, obviously, from space!

## II

They made eight miles. At least one mile of that, added together, was climbing straight up. Another mile was straight down. The rest was boulder-strewn, twisting, donkey-wide, slanting, slippery stone.

But there was no sign of anyone but themselves. The sky remained undisturbed. No planes. They saw no sign of the raiding force from across the border, and they heard no gunfire.

Coburn struggled against the stark impossibility of what he had seen. The most horrifying concept regarding invasion from space is that of creatures who are able to destroy or subjugate humanity. A part of that concept was in Coburn's mind now. Dillon marched on ahead, in every way convincingly human. But he wasn't. And to Coburn, his presence as a non-human invader of Earth made the border-crossing by the Bulgarians seem almost benevolent.

They went on. The next hill was long and steep. Then they were at the hill crest. They looked down into a village called Náousa. It was larger than Ardea, but not much larger. One of the houses burned untended. Figures moved about. There were tanks in sight, and many soldiers in the uniform that looked dark-gray at a distance. The route by which Dillon had traveled had plainly curved into the line-of-march of the Bulgarian raiding force.

But the moving figures were not soldiers. The soldiers were still. They lay down on the grass in irregular, sprawling windrows. The tanks were not in motion. There were two-wheeled carts in

sight — reaching back along the invasion-route — and they were just as stationary as the men and the tanks. The horses had toppled in their shafts. They were motionless.

The movement was of civilians — men and women alike. They were Greek villagers, and they moved freely among the unmillitarily recumbent troops, and even from this distance their occupation was clear. They were happily picking the soldiers' pockets. But there was one figure which moved from one prone figure to another much too quickly to be looting. Coburn saw sunlight glitter on something in his hand.

Dillon noticed the same thing Coburn did at the same instant. He bounded forward. He ran toward the village and its tumbled soldiers in great, impossible leaps. No man could make such leaps or travel so fast. He seemed almost to soar toward the village, shouting. Coburn and Janice saw him reach the village. They saw him rush toward the one man who had been going swiftly from one prone soldier to another. It was too far to see Dillon's action, but the sunlight glittered again on something bright, which this time flew through the air and dropped to the ground.

The villagers grouped about Dillon. There was no sign of a struggle.

"What's happened?" demanded Janice uneasily. "Those are soldiers on the ground."

Coburn's fright prevented his caution. He shouted furiously. "He's not a man! You saw it! No man can run so fast! You saw those jumps! He's not human! He's — something else!"

Janice jerked her eyes to Coburn in panic. "What did you say?"

Coburn panted: "Dillon's no man! He's a monster from somewhere in space! And he and his kind have killed those soldiers! Murdered them! And the soldiers are men! You stay here. I'll go down there and —"

"No!" said Janice, "I'm coming too."

He took the donkey's halter and led the animal down to the village, with Janice trembling a little in the saddle. He talked in a tight, taut, hysterical tone. He told what he'd found up on the cliffside. He described in detail the similitude of a man's body he'd found deflated beside a stunted bush.

He did not look at Janice as he talked. He moved doggedly toward the village, dragging at the donkey's head. They neared the houses very slowly, and Coburn considered that he walked into the probability of a group of other creatures from unthinkable other star systems, disguised as men. It did not occur to him that his

sudden outburst about Dillon sounded desperately insane to Janice.

They reached the first of the fallen soldiers. Janice looked, shuddering. Then she said thinly: "He's breathing!"

He was. He was merely a boy. Twenty or thereabouts. He lay on his back, his eyes closed. His face was upturned like a dead man's. But his breast rose and fell rhythmically. He slept as if he were drugged.

But that was more incredible than if he'd been dead. Regiments of men fallen simultaneously asleep. . . .

Coburn's flow of raging speech stopped short. He stared. He saw other fallen soldiers. Dozens of them. In coma-like slumber, the soldiers who had come to loot and murder lay like straws upon the ground. If they had been dead it would have been more believable. At least there are ways to kill men. But this . . .

Dillon parted the group of villagers about him and came toward Coburn and Janice. He was frowning in a remarkably human fashion.

"Here's a mess!" he said irritably. "Those Bulgars came marching down out of the pass. The cavalry galloped on ahead and cut the villagers off so they couldn't run away. They started to loot the village. They weren't

pleasant. Women began to scream, and there were shootings — all in a matter of minutes. And then the looters began to act strangely. They staggered around and sat down and went to sleep!"

He waved his hands in a helpless gesture, but Coburn was not deceived.

"The tanks arrived. And they stopped — and their crews went to sleep! Then the infantry appeared, staggering as it marched. The officers halted to see what was happening ahead, and the entire infantry dropped off to sleep right where it stood!"

"It's bad! If it had happened a mile or so back . . . The Greeks must have played a trick on them, but those cavalymen raised the devil in the few minutes they were out of hand! They killed some villagers and then keeled over. And now the villagers aren't pleased. There was one man whose son was murdered, and he's been slitting the Bulgars' throats!"

He looked at Coburn, and Coburn said in a grating voice: "I see."

Dillon said distressedly: "One can't let them slit the throats of sleeping men! I'll have to stay here to keep them from going at it again. I say, Coburn, will you take one of their staff cars and run on down somewhere and tell the Greek government what's happened here? Something should be done about it! Soldiers should

come to keep order and take charge of these chaps."

"Yes," said Coburn. "I'll do it. I'll take Janice along, too."

"Splendid!" Dillon nodded as if in relief. "She'd better get out of the mess entirely. I fancy there'd have been a full-scale massacre if we hadn't come along. The Greeks have no reason to love these chaps, and their intentions were hardly amiable. But one can't let them be murdered!"

Coburn had his hand on his revolver in his pocket. His finger was on the trigger. But if Dillon needed him to run an errand, then there obviously were no others of his own kind about.

Dillon turned his back. He gave orders in the barbarous dialect of the mountains. His voice was authoritative. Men obeyed him and dragged uniformed figures out of a light half-track that was plainly a staff car. Dillon beckoned, and Coburn moved toward him. The important thing as far as Coburn was concerned was to get Janice to safety. Then to report the full event.

"I . . . I'm not sure . . ." began Janice, her voice shaking.

"I'll prove what I said," raged Coburn in a low tone. "I'm not crazy, though I feel like it!"

Dillon beckoned again. Janice slipped off the donkey's back. She looked pitifully frightened and irresolute.

"I've located the chap who's the mayor of this village, or something like that. Take him along. They might not believe you, but they'll have to investigate when he turns up."

A white-bearded villager reluctantly climbed into the back of the car. Dillon pleasantly offered to assist Janice into the front seat. She climbed in, deathly white, frightened of Coburn and almost ashamed to admit that his vehement outburst had made her afraid of Dillon, too.

Dillon came around to Coburn's side of the vehicle. "Privately," he said with a confidential air, "I'd advise you to dump this mayor person where he can reach authority, and then go away quietly and say nothing of what happened up here. If the Greeks are using some contrivance that handles an affair like this, it will be top secret. They won't like civilians knowing about it."

Coburn's grip on his revolver was savage. It seemed likely, now, that Dillon was the only one of his extraordinary kind about.

"I think I know why you say that," he said harshly.

Dillon smiled. "Oh, come now!" he protested. "I'm quite unofficial!"

He was incredibly convincing at that moment. There was a wry half-smile on his face. He looked absolutely human; abso-

lutely like the British correspondent Coburn had met in Salonika. He was too convincing. Coburn knew he would suspect his own sanity unless he made sure.

"You're not only unofficial," said Coburn grimly. His hand came up over the edge of the staff-car door. It had his revolver in it. It bore inexorably upon the very middle of Dillon's body. "You're not human, either! You're not a man! Your name isn't Dillon! You're — something I haven't a word for! But if you try anything fancy I'll see if a bullet through your middle will stop you!"

Dillon did not move. He said easily: "You're being absurd, my dear fellow. Put away that pistol."

"You slipped!" said Coburn thickly. "You said the Greeks played a trick on this raiding party. But you played it. At Ardea, when you climbed that cliff — no man could climb so fast. No man could run as you ran down into this village. And I saw that body you're wearing when you weren't in it! I followed you up the cliff when —" Coburn's voice was ragingly sarcastic — "when you were taking pictures!"

Dillon's face went impassive. Then he said: "Well?"

"Will you let me scratch your finger?" demanded Coburn almost hysterically. "If it bleeds, I'll apologize and freely admit

I'm crazy! But if it doesn't . . ."

The thing-that-was-not-Dillon raised its eyebrows. "It wouldn't," it said coolly. "You do know. What follows?"

"You're something from space," accused Coburn, "sneaking around Earth trying to find out how to conquer us! You're an Invader! You're trying out weapons. And you want me to keep my mouth shut so we Earth people won't patch up our own quarrels and join forces to hunt you down! But we'll do it! We'll do it!"

The thing-that-was-not-Dillon said gently: "No. My dear chap, no one will believe you."

"We'll see about that!" snapped Coburn. "Put those cameras in the car!"

The figure that looked so human hesitated a long instant, then obeyed. It lowered the two seeming cameras into the back part of the staff car.

Janice started to say, "I . . . I . . ."

The pseudo-Dillon smiled at her. "You think he's insane, and naturally you're scared," it said reassuringly. "But he's sane. He's quite right. I am from outer space. And I'm not humoring him either. Look!"

He took a knife from his pocket and snapped it open. He deliberately ran the point down the side of one of his fingers.

The skin parted. Something that looked exactly like foam-



rubber was revealed. There were even bubbles in it.

The pseudo-Dillon said, "You see, you don't have to be afraid of him. He's sane, and quite human. You'll feel much better traveling with him." Then the figure turned to Coburn. "You won't believe it, but I really like you, Coburn. I like the way you've reacted. It's very . . . human."

Coburn said to him: "It'll be human, too, when we start to hunt you down!" He let the staff car in gear. Dillon smiled at him. He let in the clutch, and the car leaped ahead.

In the two camera-cases Coburn was sure that he had the cryptic device that was responsible for the failure of a cold-war raid. He wouldn't have dared drive away from Dillon leaving those devices behind. If they were what he thought, they'd be absolute proof of the truth of his story, and they should furnish clues to the sort of science the Invaders possessed. Show the world that Invaders were upon it, and all the world would combine to defend Earth. The cold war would end.

But a bitter doubt came to him. Would they? Or would they offer zestfully to be viceroys and overseers for the Invaders, betraying the rest of mankind for the privilege of ruling them even under unhuman masters?

Janice swayed against his shoul-

der. He cast a swift glance at her. Her face was like marble.

"What's the matter?"

She shook her head. "I'm trying not to faint," she said unsteadily. "When you told me he was from another world I . . . thought you were crazy. But when he admitted it . . . when he proved it . . ."

Coburn growled. The trail twisted and dived down a steep slope. It twisted again and ran across a rushing, frothing stream. Coburn drove into the rivulet. Water reared up in wing-like sheets on either side. The staff car climbed out, rocking, on the farther side. Coburn put it to the ascent beyond. The trail turned and climbed and descended as the stony masses of the hills required.

"He's — from another world!" repeated Janice. Her teeth chattered. "What do they want — creatures like him? How — how many of them are there? Anybody could be one of them! What do they want?"

"This is a pretty good world," said Coburn fiercely. "And his kind will want it. We're merely the natives, the aborigines, to them. Maybe they plan to wipe us out, or enslave us. But they won't! We can spot them now! They don't bleed. Scratch one and you find — foam-rubber. X-rays will spot them. We'll learn to pick them out — and when some specialists look over those things that look like cameras we'll know more

still! Enough to do something!"

"Then you think it's an invasion from space?"

"What else?" snapped Coburn.

His stomach was a tight cramped knot now. He drove the car hard!

In air miles the distance to be covered was relatively short. In road miles it seemed interminable. The road was bad and curving beyond belief. It went many miles east and many miles west for every mile of southward gain. The hour grew late. Coburn had fled Ardea at sunrise, but they'd reached Náousa after midday and he drove frantically over incredible mountain roads until dusk. Despite sheer recklessness, however, he could not average thirty miles an hour. There were times when even the half-track had to crawl or it would overturn. The sun set, and he went on up steep grades and down steeper ones in the twilight. Night fell and the headlights glared ahead, and the staff-car clanked and clanked and grumbled and roared on through the darkness.

They probably passed through villages — the headlights showed stone hovels once or twice — but no lights appeared. It was midnight before they saw a moving yellow spot of brightness with a glare as of fire upon steam above it. There were other small lights in a row behind it, and they

saw that all the lights moved.

"A railroad!" said Coburn. "We're getting somewhere!"

It was a railroad train on the other side of a valley, but they did not reach the track. The highway curved away from it.

At two o'clock in the morning they saw electric lights. The highway became suddenly passable. Presently they ran into the still, silent streets of a slumbering town — Serrai — an administrative center for this part of Greece. They threaded its ways while Coburn watched for a proper place to stop. Once a curiously-hatted policeman stared blankly at them under an arc lamp as the staff car clanked and rumbled past him. They saw a great pile of stone which was a church. They saw a railroad station.

Not far away there was a building in which there were lights. A man in uniform came out of its door.

Coburn stopped a block away. There were uneasy stirrings, and the white-bearded passenger from the village said incomprehensible things in a feeble voice. Coburn got Janice out of the car first. She was stiff and dizzy when she tried to walk. The Greek was in worse condition still. He clung to the side of the staff car.

"We tell the truth," said Coburn curtly, "when we talk to the police. We tell the whole truth — except about Dillon. That sounds

too crazy. We tell it to top-level officials only, after they realize that something they don't know anything about has really taken place. Talk of Invaders from space would either get us locked up as lunatics or would create a panic. This man will tell what happened up there, and they'll investigate. But we take these so-called cameras to Salonika, and get to an American battleship."

He lifted Dillon's two cameras by the carrying-straps. And the straps pulled free. They'd held the cases safely enough during a long journey on foot across the mountains. But they pulled clear now.

Coburn had a bitter thought. He struck a match. He saw the leather cases on the floor of the staff car. He picked up one of them. He took it to the light of the headlights, standing there in the resonant darkness of a street in a city of stone houses.

The leather was brittle. It was friable, as if it had been in a fire. Coburn plucked it open, and it came apart in his hands. Inside there was the smell of scorched things. There was a gritty metallic powder. Nothing else. The other carrying-case was in exactly the same condition.

Coburn muttered bitterly: "They were set to destroy themselves if they got into other hands than Dillon's. We haven't a bit of proof that he wasn't a human

being. Not a shred of proof!"

He suddenly felt a sick rage, as if he had been played with and mocked. The raid from Bulgaria was serious enough, of course. It would have killed hundreds of people and possibly hundreds of others would have been enslaved. But even that was secondary in Coburn's mind. The important thing was that there were Invaders upon Earth. Non-human monsters, who passed for humans through disguise. They had been able to travel through space to land secretly upon Earth. They moved unknown among men, learning the secrets of mankind, preparing for — what?

### III

They got into Salonika early afternoon of the next day, after many hours upon an antique railroad train that puffed and grunted and groaned among interminable mountains. Coburn got a taxi to take Janice to the office of the Breen Foundation which had sent her up to the north of Greece to establish its philanthropic instruction courses. He hadn't much to say to Janice as they rode. He was too disheartened.

In the cab, though, he saw great placards on which newspaper headlines appeared in Greek. He could make out the gist of them. Essentially, they shrieked that Bulgarians had invaded Greece

and had been wiped out. He made out the phrase for valiant Greek army. And the Greek army was valiant enough, but it hadn't had anything to do with this.

From the police station in Serrai — he had been interviewed there until dawn — he knew what action had been taken. Army planes had flown northward in the darkness, moved by the Mayor's, and Coburn's, and Janice's tale of Bulgarian soldiers on Greek soil, sleeping soundly. They had released parachute flares and located the village of Náousa. Parachutists with field radios had jumped, while other flares burned to light them to the ground. That was that. Judging by the placards, their reports had borne out the story Coburn had brought down. There would be a motorized Greek division on the way to take charge of the four-thousand-odd unconscious raiders. There was probably an advance guard there now.

But there was no official news. Even the Greek newspapers called it rumors. Actually, it was leaked information. It would be reasonable for the Greek government to let it leak, look smug, and blandly say "No comment" to all inquiries, including those from Bulgaria.

But behind that appearance of complacency, the Greek government would be going quietly mad trying to understand what so fortunately had happened. And Co-

burn could tell them. But he knew better than to try without some sort of proof. Yet, he had to tell. The facts were more important than what people thought of him.

The cab stopped before his own office. He paid the driver. The driver beamed and said happily: "*Tys nikisame, é!*"

Coburn said, "*Poly kala. Orea.*"

His office was empty. It was dustier than usual. His secretary was probably taking a holiday since he was supposed to be out of town. He grunted and sat down at the telephone. He called a man he knew. Hallen — another American — was attached to a non-profit corporation which was attached to an agency which was supposed to cooperate with a committee which had something to do with NATO. Hallen answered the phone in person.

Coburn identified himself. "Have you heard any rumors about a Bulgarian raid up-country?" he asked.

"I haven't heard anything else since I got up," Hallen told him.

"I was there," said Coburn. "I brought the news down. Can you come over?"

"I'm halfway there now!" said Hallen as he slammed down the phone.

Coburn paced up and down his office. It was very dusty. Even the seat of the chair at his secretary's desk was dusty. The odds

were that she was coming in only to sort the mail, and not even sitting down for that. He shrugged.

He heard footsteps. The door opened. His secretary, Helena, came in. She looked surprised.

"I was at lunch," she explained. She had a very slight accent. She hung up her coat. "I am sorry. I stopped at a store."

He had paused in his pacing to nod at her. Now he stared, but her back was turned toward him. He blinked. She had just told a very transparent lie. And Helena was normally very truthful.

"You had a good trip?" she asked politely.

"Fair," said Coburn. "Any phone calls this morning?" he asked.

"Not this morning," she said politely.

She reached in a desk drawer. She brought out paper. She put it in the typewriter and began to type.

Coburn felt very queer. Then he saw something else. There was a fly in the office—a large, green-bodied fly of metallic lustre. The inhabitants of Salonika said with morbid pride that it was a specialty of the town, with the most painful of all known fly stings. And Helena abhorred flies.

It landed on the bare skin of her neck. She did not notice. It stayed there. Ordinarily she would have jumped up, exclaiming angrily in Greek, and then she would have

pursued the fly vengefully with a folded newspaper until she killed it. But now she ignored it.

Hallen came in, stamping. Coburn closed the door behind him. He felt queer at the pit of his stomach. For Helena to let a fly stay on her neck suggested that her skin was . . . somehow not like its usual self.

"What happened to those Bulgarians?" demanded Hallen.

Coburn told him precisely what he'd seen when he arrived in Náousa after an eight-mile hike through mountains. Then he went back and told Hallen precisely what he'd seen up on the cliffside.

"His cameras were some sort of weapon. He played it on the marching column, it took effect and they went to sleep," he finished. "I took them away from him and brought them down, but —"

He told about the contents of the camera cases being turned to a gritty, sooty powder. Then he added: "Dillon set them to destroy themselves. You understand. He's not a man. He's a creature from some planet other than Earth, passing for a human being. He's an invader from space."

Hallen's expression was uneasy and compassionate but utterly unbelieving. Helena shivered and turned away her face. Coburn's lips went taut. He reached down to his desk. He made a sudden,

abrupt gesture. Hallen caught his breath and started up.

Coburn said curtly: "Another one of them. Helena, is that foam-suit comfortable?"

The girl jerked her face around. She looked frightened.

"Helena," said Coburn, "the real Helena, that is, would not sit down on a dusty chair. No woman would. But you did. She is a very truthful girl. You lied to me. And I just stuck pins in your shoulder and you didn't notice. They're sticking in your foam suit now. You and the creature that passed for Dillon up-country are both aliens. Invaders. Do you want to try to convince me otherwise?"

The girl said evenly: "Mr. Coburn, I do not think you are well —"

Then Coburn said thickly: "I'm crazy enough to put a bullet through you if your gang of devils has harmed the real Helena. What's happened to her?"

Hallen moved irresolutely to interfere. But the girl's expression changed. She smiled. "The real Helena, Mr. Coburn," said an entirely new voice, "has gone to the suburbs to visit her fiancé's family. She is quite safe."

There was dead silence. The figure — it even moved like Helena — got composedly to its feet. It got its coat. It put the coat on. Hallen stared with his mouth

open. The pins hadn't convinced him, but the utterly different voice coming from this girl's mouth had. Yet, waves of conflicting disbelief and conviction, horror and a racking doubt, chased themselves over his features.

"She admits she's not Helena!" said Coburn with loathing. "It's not human! Should I shoot it?"

The girl smiled at him again. Her eyes were very bright. "You will not, Mr. Coburn. And you will not even try to keep me prisoner to prove your story. If I screamed that you attack me —" the smile widened — "Helena's good Greek friends would come to my assistance."

She walked confidently to the door and opened it. Then she said warmly: "You are very intelligent, Mr. Coburn. We approve of you very much. But nobody will believe you."

The office door closed.

Coburn turned stiffly to the man he'd called to hear him. "Should I have shot her, Hallen?"

Hallen sat down as if his knees had given way beneath him. After a long time he got out a handkerchief and painfully mopped his face. At the same time he shivered.

"N-no. . . ." Then he swallowed. "My God, Coburn! It's true!"

"Yes," said Coburn bitterly,

"or you're as crazy as I am."

Hallen's eyes looked haunted. "I—I . . ." He swallowed again. "There's no question about the Bulgarian business. That did happen! And you were there. And — there've been other things. . . . Rumors. . . . Reports that nobody believed. . . . I might be able to get somebody to listen. . . ." He shivered again. "If it's true, it's the most terrible thing that ever happened. Invaders from space. . . . Where do you think they came from, Coburn?"

"The creature that looked like Dillon could climb incredibly fast. I saw it run and leap. Nothing on Earth could run or leap like that." Coburn shrugged. "Maybe a planet of another sun, with a monstrous gravity."

"Try to get somebody to believe that, eh?" Hallen got painfully to his feet. "I'll see what I can do. I . . . don't know that I can do anything but get myself locked up for observation. But I'll call you in an hour."

He went unsteadily out of the door. Coburn instantly called the Breen Foundation on the telephone. He'd left Janice there less than an hour before. She came to the phone and gasped when she heard his voice. Raging, he told her of Helena, then cautioned her to be especially careful — to be suspicious of everybody.

"Don't take anybody's word!" snapped Coburn. "Doubt every-

body! Doubt me! Until you're absolutely certain. Those creatures are everywhere. . . . They may pretend to be anybody!"

After Coburn hung up on Janice, he sat back and tried to think logically. There had to be some way by which an extra-terrestrial Invader could be told instantly from a human being. Unmask and prove even one such creature, and the whole story would be proved. But how detect them? Their skin was perfectly deceptive. Scratched, of course, they could be caught. But one couldn't go around scratching people. There was nothing of the alien creature's own actual form that showed.

Then Coburn remembered the Dillon foam suit. The head had been hollow. Flaccid. Holes instead of eyes. The creature's own eyes showed through.

But he'd have to make certain. He'd have to look at a foam-suited creature. He could have examined Helena's eyes, but she was gone now. However, there was an alternative. There was a Dillon in Salonika, as there was a Helena. If the Dillon in Salonika was the real Dillon — if there were a real Dillon — he could look at his eyes. He could tell if he were the false Dillon or the real one.

At this hour of the afternoon a Britisher would consider tea a necessity. There was only one

place in Salonika where they served tea that an Englishman would consider drinkable. Coburn got into a cab and gave the driver the address, and made sure of the revolver in his pocket. He was frightened. He was either going to meet with a monster from outer space, or be on the way to making so colossal a fool of himself that a mental asylum would yawn for him.

He went into the one coffee-shop in Salonika which served drinkable tea. It was dark and dingy inside, though the tableclothes were spotless. He went in, and there was Dillon.

Coburn's flesh crawled. If the figure sitting there with the *London Times* and a cup of tea before him were actually a monster from another planet . . .

But Dillon read comfortably, and sipped his tea. Coburn approached, and the Englishman looked up inquiringly.

"I was . . . up in the mountains," said Coburn feverishly, "when those Bulgarians came over. I can give you the story."

Dillon said frostily: "I'm not interested. The government's officially denied that any such incident took place. It's merely a silly rumor."

It was reasonable that it should be denied. But it had happened, nonetheless. Coburn stared, despite a consciousness that he was not conspicuously rational in the

way his eyes searched Dillon's face hungrily. The eyes were different! The eyes of the Dillon up in the mountains had been larger, and the brown part — But he had to be sure.

Suddenly, Coburn found himself grinning. There was a simple, a perfect, an absolute test for humanity!

Dillon said suspiciously: "What the devil are you staring at me for?"

Coburn continued to grin uncontrollably, even as he said in a tone of apology: "I hate to do this, but I have to be sure. . . ."

He swung. He connected with Dillon's nose. Blood started.

Coburn zestfully let himself be thrown out, while Dillon roared and tried to get at him through the flying wedge of waiters. He felt an enormous relaxation on the way back to his office in another cab. He was a trifle battered, but it was worth it.

Back in the office he called Hallen again. And again Hallen answered. He sounded guilty and worried.

"I don't know whether I'm crazy or not," he said bitterly. "But I was in your office. I saw your secretary there — and she didn't feel pins stuck in her. And something did happen to those Bulgarians that the Greeks don't know anything about, or the Americans either. So you're to tell



your story to the high brass down in Athens. I think you'll be locked up afterward as a lunatic — and me with you for believing my own eyes. But a plane's being readied."

"Where do I meet you?" asked Coburn.

Hallen told him. A certain room out at the airport. Coburn hung up. The telephone rang instantly. He was on the way out, but he turned back and answered it. Janice's voice — amazingly convincing — came from the instrument. And at the first words his throat went dry. Because it couldn't be Janice.

"I've been trying to get you. Have you tried to reach me?"

"Why, no. Why?"

Janice's voice said: "I've something interesting to tell you. I left the office an hour ago. I'm at the place where I live when I'm in Salonika. Write down the address. Can you come here? I've found out something astonishing!"

He wrote down the address. He had a feeling of nightmarishness. This was not Janice —

"I'm clearing up some matters you'll guess at," he said grimly, "so I may be a little while getting there. You'll wait?"

He hung up. And then with a rather ghastly humor he took some pins from a box on the desk and worked absorbedly at bending one around the inside of the band of the seal ring he wore on his right hand.

But he didn't go to the telephoned address. He went to the Breen Foundation. And Janice was there. She was the real Janice. He knew it instantly he saw her. She was panic-stricken when he told her of his own telephone experience. Her teeth chattered. But she knew — instinctively, she said — that he was himself. She got into the cab with him.

They reached the airport and found the office Hallen had named. The lettering on it, in Greek and French, said that it was a reception room for official visitors only.

"Our status is uncertain," said Coburn drily. "We may be official guests, or we may be crazy. It's a toss-up which status sticks."

He opened the door and looked carefully inside before he entered. Hallen was there. There was a lean, hard-bitten colonel of the American liaison force in Greece. There was a Greek general, pudgy and genial, standing with his back to a window and his hands clasped behind him. There were two Greek colonels and a major. They regarded him soberly.

"Howdo, Coburn," said Hallen painfully. "You're heading for Athens, you know. This is Miss Ames? But these gentlemen have . . . ah . . . a special concern with that business up-country. They'd like to hear your story before you leave."

"I suppose," said Coburn

curtly, "it's a sort of preliminary commission in lunacy."

But he shook hands all around. He kept his left hand in his coat pocket as he shook hands with his right. His revolver was in his left-hand pocket now too. The Greek general beamed at him. The American colonel's eyes were hard and suspicious. One of the two Greek colonels was very slightly cross-eyed. The Greek major shook hands solemnly.

Coburn took a deep breath. "I know my tale sounds crazy," he said, "but . . . I had a telephone call just now. Hallen will bear me out that my secretary was impersonated by somebody else this afternoon."

"I've told them that," said Hallen unhappily.

"And something was impersonating Dillon up in the hills," finished Coburn. "I've reason to believe that at this address" — and he handed the address he'd written down to Hallen — "a . . . creature will be found who will look most convincingly like Miss Ames, here. You might send and see."

The American colonel snorted: "This whole tale's preposterous! It's an attempt to cash in on the actual mystery of what happened up-country."

The Greek general protested gently. His English was so heavily accented as to be hard to understand, but he pointed out that

Coburn knew details of the event in Náousa that only someone who had been there could know.

"True enough," said the American officer darkly, "but he can tell the truth now, before we make fools of ourselves sending him to Athens to be unmasked. Suppose," he said unpleasantly, "you give us the actual facts!"

Coburn nodded. "The idea you find you can't take is that creatures that aren't human can be on Earth and pass for human beings. There's some evidence on that right here." He nodded to the Greek major who was the junior officer in the room. "Major, will you show these other gentlemen the palm of your hand?"

The Greek major frowned perplexedly. He lifted his hand and looked at it. Then his face went absolutely impassive.

"I'm ready to shoot!" snapped Coburn. "Show them your hand. I can tell now."

He felt the tensing of the others in the room, not toward the major but toward him. They were preparing to jump him, thinking him mad.

But the major grinned ruefully: "Clever, Mr. Coburn! But how did you pick me out?"

Then there was a sensation of intolerable brightness all around. But it was not actual light. It was a sensation inside one's brain.

Coburn felt himself falling. He knew, somehow, that the others

were falling too. He saw everyone in the room in the act of slumping limply to the floor — all but the Greek major. And Coburn felt a bitter, despairing fury as consciousness left him.

#### IV

He came to in a hospital room, with a nurse and two doctors and an elaborate oxygen-administering apparatus. The apparatus was wheeled out. The nurse followed. The two doctors hurried after her. The American colonel of the airport was standing by the bed on which Coburn lay, fully dressed.

Coburn felt perfectly all right. He stirred. The American colonel said sourly: "You're not harmed. Nobody was. But Major Pangalos got away."

Coburn sat up. There was a moment's bare trace of dizziness, and that was gone too. Coburn said: "Where's Miss Ames? What happened to her?"

"She's getting oxygen," said the colonel. "We were rushed here from the airport, sleeping soundly just like those Bulgarians. Major Pangalos ordered it before he disappeared. Helicopters brought some Bulgarians down, by the way, and oxygen brought them to. So naturally they gave us the same treatment. Very effective."

The colonel looked both chastened and truculent. "How'd you know Major Pangalos for what he

was? He was accepted everywhere as a man."

"His eyes were queer," said Coburn. He stood up experimentally. "I figured they would be, if one looked. I saw the foam suit that creature wore up-country, when he wasn't in it. There were holes for the eyes. It occurred to me that his eyes weren't likely to be like ours. Not exactly. So I hunted up the real Dillon, and his eyes weren't like I remembered. I punched him in the nose, by the way, to make sure he'd bleed and was human. He was."

Coburn continued, "You see, they obviously come from a heavy planet and move differently. They're stronger than we are. Much like the way we'd be on the moon with one-sixth Earth gravity. They probably are used to a thicker atmosphere. If so, their eyes wouldn't be right for here. They'd need eyeglasses."

"Major Pangalos didn't —"

"Contact eyeglasses," said Coburn sourly. "Little cups of plastic. They slip under the eyelids and touch the white part of the eye. Familiar enough. But that's not all."

The American colonel looked troubled. "I know contact lenses," he admitted. "But —"

"If the Invaders have a thick atmosphere at home," Coburn said, "they may have a cloudy sky. The pupils of their eyes may need to be larger. Perhaps they're

a different shape. Or their eyes may be a completely alien color. Anyhow, they need contact lenses not only to correct their vision, but to make their eyes look like ours. They're painted on the inside to change the natural look and color. It's very deceptive. But you can tell."

"That goes to Headquarters at once!" snapped the colonel.

He went out briskly. Coburn followed him out of the room to look for Janice. And Janice happened to be looking for him at exactly the same moment. He was genuinely astonished to realize how relieved he was that she was all right.

He said apologetically: "I was worried! When I felt myself passing out I felt pretty rotten at having failed to protect you."

She looked at him with nearly the same sort of surprised satisfaction. "I'm all right," she said breathlessly. "I was worried about you."

The roaring of motors outside the hospital interrupted them. More and more vehicles arrived, until a deep purring filled the air. A Greek doctor with a worried expression hurried somewhere. Soldiers appeared, hard-bitten, tough, professional Greek soldiers. Hallen came out of a hospital room. The Greek general appeared with one of the two colonels who'd been at the airport. The general nodded, and his eyes seemed cor-

dial. He waved them ahead of him into a waiting elevator. The elevator descended. They went out of the hospital and there was an armored car waiting. An impressive escort of motorcycle troops waited with it.

The Greek general saw Coburn's cynical expression at sight of the guards. He explained blandly that since oxygen brought sleeping Bulgarians out of their slumber — and had been used on them — oxygen was handy for use by anybody who experienced a bright flash of light in his mind. The Bulgarian soldiers, incidentally, said that outside the village of Ardes they'd felt as if the sunlight had brightened amazingly, but they felt no effects for two hours afterward, when they fell asleep at Nàousa. So, said the general almost unintelligibly, if anything untoward happened on the way to the airport, everybody would start breathing oxygen. A sensation of bright light would be untoward.

The armored car started off, with motorcyclists crowded about it with weapons ready. But the ride to the airport was uneventful. To others than Janice and Coburn it may even have been tedious. But when she understood the general's explanation, she shivered a little. She leaned insensibly closer to Coburn. He took her hand protectively in his.

They reached the airport. They roared through the gateway and directly out upon the darkened field. Something bellowed and raced down a runway and took to the air. Other things followed it. They gained altitude and circled back overhead. Tiny bluish flickerings moved across the overcast sky. Exhaust flames.

Coburn realized that it was a fighter plane escort.

The huge transport plane that waited for them was dark. They climbed into it and found their seats. When it roared down the unlighted field and took to the air, everything possible had been done to keep anybody from bringing any weapon to bear upon it.

"All safe now!" said the voice of the American colonel in the darkness of the unlit plane, as the plane gained height. "Incidentally, Coburn, why did you want to look at Pangalos' palm? What did you expect to find there?"

"When I started for the airport," Coburn explained, "I bent a pin around the band of a ring I wear. I could let it lie flat when I shook hands. Or I could make it stand out like a spur. I set it with my thumb. I saw Pangalos' eyes, so I had it stand out, and I made a tear in his plastic skin when I shook hands with him. He didn't feel it, of course." He paused. "Did anybody go to the address I gave Hallan?"

Hallan said, in the darkness:

"Major Pangalos got there first."

The blackness outside the plane seemed to grow deeper. There was literally nothing to be seen but the instrument dials up at the pilots' end of the ship.

The Greek general asked a question in his difficult English.

"Where'd they come from?" repeated Coburn. "I've no idea. Off Earth, yes. A heavy planet, yes. I doubt they come from our solar system, though. Somewhere among the stars."

The Greek general said something with a sly up-twist of his voice. Whatever and whoever the invaders were, he said, they did not like Bulgarians. If they'd knocked out the raiding party simply to test their weapons against human subjects, at least they had chosen suitable and pleasing subjects for the test.

There was light. For an instant Coburn tensed. But the plane climbed and the brightness steadied. It was the top of a cloud bank, brilliantly white in the moonlight. They had flown up through it, and it reached as far ahead as they could see. A stubby fighter plane swam up out of the mist and fell into position alongside. Others appeared. They took formation about the transport and all flew steadily through the moonlight.

"I wish I knew," said the American colonel vexedly. "if

those creatures were only testing weapons, or if they were getting set to start bargaining with us!"

"Meaning?" asked Coburn.

"If they're here," said the colonel angrily, "and if they do mean to meddle in our business, they may set up a sort of auction with us bidding against the Iron Curtain gang for their friendship. And *they'd* make any deal!"

The Greek general agreed drily. He said that free people were not practical people. They were always ready to die rather than cease to be free. Surely the Greeks had proved themselves ready to die. But people like the Bulgarians thought that to continue to live was the most important thing in the world. It was, of course, the practical viewpoint. . . .

"They can have it!" growled Coburn.

Janice said hesitantly: "But the Invaders haven't killed anybody we know of. They could have killed the Bulgarians. They didn't. The one who called himself Dillon stopped one man from killing them. And they could have killed us, earlier today at the airport. Could they want to be friends?"

"They're starting the wrong way," said Coburn.

The Greek general stirred in his seat, but he was pointedly silent.

The pilot snapped abruptly from up at the bow of the plane:

"Colonel! sir! Two of the fighters are climbing as if they've spotted something. There go the rest."

Coburn leaned across Janice to stare out the window. When the fighters were below the transport, they could be seen in silhouette against the clouds. Above, their exhaust flames pin-pointed them. Small blue flames climbed steeply.

The big ship went on. The roar of its motors was steady and unvarying. From a passenger seat it was not possible to look overhead. But suddenly there were streaking sparks against the stars. Tracer bullets. Fighters swerved and plunged to intercept something. . . .

And a Thing came down out of the sky with a terrific velocity. Tracer bullets sprayed all around it. Some could be seen to ricochet off its sides. Flashings came from the alien craft. They were not explosions from guns. They were lurid, actintic, smokeless blasts of pure light. The Thing seemed to be made of polished metal. It dodged, trying to approach the transport. The fighters lunged to prevent it. The ghastly game of interception seemed to rush here and there all over the sky.

The strange object was not possibly of human design or manufacture. It had no wings. It left no trail of jet fumes or rocket smoke. It was glittering and mirror-like, and it was shaped almost

exactly like two turtle-shells base to base. It was flat and oval. It had no visible external features.

It flung itself about with incredible darts and jerkings. It could stop stock still as no plane could possibly stop, and accelerate at a rate no human body could endure. It tried savagely to get through the swarming fighters to the transport. Its light weapon flashed — but the pilots would be wearing oxygen masks and there were no casualties among the human planes. Once a fighter did fall off in a steep dive, and fluttered almost down to the cloud bank before it recovered and came back with its guns spitting.

That one appeared to end the fight. It came straight up, pumping tracers at the steel flier from below. And the glittering Thing seemed to stop dead in the air. Then it shuddered. It was bathed in the flaring sparks of tracers. Then —

It dropped like a stone, tumbling aimlessly over and over as it dropped. It plummeted into the cloud bank.

Suddenly the clouds were lighted from within. Something inside flared with a momentary, terrifying radiance. No lightning bolt ever flashed more luridly.

The transport plane and its escort flew on and on over the moonlit bank of clouds.

Presently orders came by radio. On the report of this attack, the

flight plan would be changed, for safety. If the air convoy had been attacked once, it might be attacked again. So it would be wisest to get it immediately to where there would be plenty of protection. Therefore, the transport plane would head for Naples.

Nearly the whole of the United States Mediterranean fleet was in the Bay of Naples just then. It had been there nearly a week, and by day its liberty parties swarmed ashore. The merchants and the souvenir salesmen were entranced. American sailors had money and they spent it. The fleet's officers were social assets, its messes bought satisfyingly of local viands, and everybody was happy.

All but one small group. The newspapers of one of the Italian political parties howled infuriatedly. They had orders to howl, from behind the Iron Curtain. The American fleet, that one party's newspapers bellowed, was imperialistic, capitalistic, and decadent. In short, there was virulent propaganda against the American fleet in Naples. But most people were glad it was there anyway. Certainly nobody stayed awake worrying about it.

People were staying awake worrying about the transport plane carrying Coburn and Janice, however. On the plane, Janice was fearful and pressed close to Coburn, and he found it an absorbing

experience and was moved to talk in a low tone about other matters than extra-terrestrial Invaders and foam suits and interstellar travel. Janice found those other subjects surprisingly fitted to make her forget about being afraid.

Elsewhere, the people who stayed awake did talk about just the subjects Coburn was avoiding. The convoy carrying Coburn to tell what he knew had been attacked. By a plane which was definitely not made or manned by human beings. The news flashed through the air across continents. It went under the ocean over sea beds. It traveled in the tightest and most closely-guarded of diplomatic codes. The Greek government gave the other NATO nations a confidential account of the Bulgarian raid and what had happened to it. These details were past question. The facts brought out by Coburn were true, too.

So secret instructions followed the news. At first they went only to highly-trusted individuals. In thirty nations, top-ranking officials and military officers blindfolded each other in turn and gravely stuck pins in each other. The blindfolded person was expected to name the place where he had been stuck. This had an historical precedent. In olden days, pins were stuck in suspected witches. They had patches of skin in which

there was no sensation, and discovery of such areas condemned them to death. Psychologists in later centuries found that patches of anaesthetic skin were typical of certain forms of hysteria, and therefore did not execute their patients. But the Invaders, by the fact that their seemingly human bodies were not flesh at all, could not pass such tests.

There were consequences. A Minister of Defense of a European nation amusedly watched the tests on his subordinates, blandly excused himself for a moment before his own turn came, and did not come back. A general of division vanished into thin air. Diplomatic code clerks painstakingly decoded the instructions for such tests, and were nowhere about when they themselves were to be tested. An eminent Hollywood director and an Olympic champion ceased to be.

In the free world nearly a hundred prominent individuals simply disappeared. Few were in position to influence high-level decisions. Many were in line to know rather significant details of world affairs. There was alarm.

It was plain, too, that not all disguised Invaders would have had to vanish. Many would not even be called on for test. They would stay where they were. And there were private persons. . . .

There was consternation. But



Janice, in the plane, was saying softly to Coburn: "The — creature who telephoned and said she was me. How did you know she wasn't?"

"I went to the Breen Foundation first," said Coburn. "I looked into your eyes — and they were right. So I didn't need to stick a pin in you."

The thought of Coburn not needing to stick a pin in her impressed Janice as beautiful trust. She sighed contentedly. "Of course you'd know," she said. "So would I — now!" She laughed a little.

The convoy flew on. The lurid round disk of the moon descended toward the west.

"It'll be sunrise soon. But I imagine we'll land before dawn."

They did. The flying group of planes flew lower. Coburn saw a single light on the ground. It was very tiny, and it vanished rearward with great speed. Later there was another light, and a dull-red glow in the sky. Still later, infinitesimal twinklings on the ground at the horizon. They increased in number but not in size, and the plane swung hugely to the left, and the lights on the ground formed a visible pattern. And moonlight — broken by the shadows of clouds — displayed the city and the Bay of Naples below.

The transport plane landed. The passengers descended. Coburn saw Hallen, the American

colonel, the Greek general, and a Greek colonel. The other had been left behind to take charge of things in Salonika. Here the uniforms were American, and naval. There were some Italian police in view, but most of the men about were American seamen, ostensibly on shore leave. But Coburn doubted very much if they were as completely unarmed as men on shore leave usually are.

A man in a cap with much gold braid greeted the American colonel, the Greek general, and the Greek colonel. He came to Coburn, to whose arm Janice seemed to cling.

"We're taking you out to the fleet. We've taken care of everything. Everybody's had pins stuck in him!"

It was very humorous, of course. They moved away from the plane. Surrounded by white-clad sailors, the party from the plane moved into the hangar.

Then a voice snapped a startled question, in English. An instant later it rasped: "Stop or I'll shoot!"

Then there was a bright flash of light. The interior of the hangar was made vivid by it. It went out. And as it disappeared there were the sounds of running footsteps. Only they did not run properly. They ran in great leaps. Impossible leaps. Monstrous leaps. A man might run like that on the moon, with a lesser gravity. A

creature accustomed to much greater gravity might run like that on Earth. But it would not be human.

It got away.

There was a waiting car. They got into it. They pulled out from the airport with other cars close before and behind. The cavalcade raced for the city and the shoreline surrounded by a guard less noisy but no less effective than the Greek motorcycle troopers.

But the Greek general said something meditative in the dark interior of the car.

"What's that?" demanded someone authoritatively.

The Greek general said it again, mildly. This latest attempt to seize them or harm them — if it was that — had been surprisingly inept. It was strange that creatures able to travel between the stars and put regiments and tanks out of action should fail so dismally to kill or kidnap Coburn, if they really wanted to. Could it be that they were not quite sincere in their efforts?

"That," said the authoritative voice, "is an idea!"

They reached the waterfront. And here in the darkest part of the night and with the moon near to setting, the waters of the Bay of Naples rolled in small, smooth-surfaced, tranquil waves. There was a Navy barge waiting. Those who had come by plane boarded it. It cast off and headed out into

the middle of the huge harbor.

In minutes there was a giant hull looming overhead. They stepped out onto a landing ladder and climbed interminably up the ship's metal side. Then there was an open door.

"Now," said the American colonel triumphantly, "now everything's all right! Nothing can happen now, short of an atomic bomb!"

The Greek general glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes. He said something in that heavy accent of his. He asked mildly if creatures — Invaders — who could travel between the stars were unlikely to be able to make atom bombs if they wanted to.

There was no answer. But somebody led Coburn into an office where this carrier's skipper was at his desk. He looked at Coburn with a sardonic, unfriendly eye.

"Mr. Coburn, I believe," he said remotely. "You've been very well staged-managed by your friends, Mr. Coburn. They've made it look as if they were trying hard to kill you, eh? But we know better, don't we? We know it's all a build-up for you to make a deal for them, eh? Well, Mr. Coburn, you'll find it's going to be a let-down instead! You're not officially under arrest, but I wouldn't advise you to try to start anything, Mr. Coburn! We're apt to be rather crude in dealing with emissaries of enemies of all the



human race. And don't forget it!"

And this was Coburn's first inkling that he was regarded as a traitor of his planet who had sold out to the Invaders. All the plans made from his information would be based on the supposition that he intended to betray mankind by misleading it.

## V

It was not yet forty-eight hours since Coburn had been interrupted in the act of starting his car up in Ardea. Greek newspapers had splashed lurid headlines of a rumored invasion by Bulgarians, and their rumored defeat. The story was not widely copied. It sounded too unlikely. In a few hours it would be time for a new set of newspapers to begin to appear. Not one of them would

print a single word about the most important disclosure in human history: that extra-terrestrial invaders moved blandly about among human beings without being suspected.

The newspapers didn't know it. On inside pages and bottom corners, the London papers might refer briefly to the remarkable rumor that had swept over Greece about an invasion force said to have crossed its border. The London papers would say that the Greek government officially denied that such a happening had taken place. The New York papers would be full of a political scandal among municipal officials, the Washington papers would deal largely with a Congressional investigation committee hearing, Los Angeles would have a new and gory murder to exploit, San Francisco news would be of a water-front strike, Tokyo would talk of cherry blossoms, Delhi of Pakistan, and the French press would discuss the political crisis. But no newspaper, anywhere, would talk about Invaders.

In the United States radar technicians had been routed out of bed and informed that night fighters had had a fight with an alien ship manned by non-humans and had destroyed it, but their radars detected nothing at all. An hour after sunrise in Naples they had come up with a combina-



tion of radar frequencies which were built to detect everything. Instructions were going out in code to all radar establishments on how to set it up on existing equipment. Long before that time, business machines had begun intricate operations with punched cards containing all known facts about the people known to have dropped out of sight. Other machines began to integrate crackpot reports of things sighted in divers places. The stores of Hunter and Nereid rockets — especially the remote-control jobs — were broken out. Great Air Transport planes began to haul them to where they might be needed.

In England, certain establishments that had never been mentioned even in Parliament were put on war alert. There was frantic scurrying-about in France. In Sweden a formerly ignored scientist was called to a twice-scrambled telephone connection and consulted at length about objects reported over Sweden's skies. The Canadian Air Force tumbled out in darkness and was briefed. In Chile there was agitation, and in Peru.

There was earnest effort to secure coöperation from behind the Iron Curtain, but that did not work. The Iron Curtain stood pat, demanding the most detailed of information and the privilege of inspecting all weapons intended for use against anybody so far

unnamed, but refusing all information of its own. In fact, there was a very normal reaction everywhere, except that the newspapers didn't know anything to print.

These secret hassles were continuing as the dawnlight moved over Italy and made Naples and its harbor quite the most beautiful place in the world. When daylight rolled over France, matters were beginning to fall into pattern. As daybreak moved across the Atlantic, at least the measures to be taken began to be visualized and orders given for their accomplishment.

And then, with sunrise in America, real preparations got under way.

But hours earlier there was consultation on the carrier in the Bay of Naples. Coburn sat in a ward-room in a cold fury which was in part despair. He had been kept in complete ignorance of all measures taken, and he felt the raging indignation of a man accused of treason. He was being questioned again. He was treated with an icy courtesy that was worse than accusation. The carrier skipper mentioned with detachment that, of course, Coburn had never been in any danger. Obviously. The event in the airport at Salonika and the attack on the convoy were window-dressing. They were not attempts to withdraw him from circulation, but to draw attention to him. Which, of course,

implied that the Invaders — whoever or whatever they might be — considered Coburn a useful tool for whatever purpose they intended.

This was before the conference officially began. It took time to arrange. There were radio technicians with microphones. The consultation — duly scrambled and re-scrambled — would be relayed to Washington while it was on. It was a top level conference. Hallen was included, but he did not seem happy.

Then things were ready. The skipper of the carrier took over, with full awareness that the very highest brass in Washington was listening to every word.

"We can skip your technical information, Mr. Coburn," he said with ironic courtesy, "unless you've something new to offer."

Coburn shook his head. He seethed.

"For the record," said the skipper, "I repeat that it is obvious that your presence at the scene when those Bulgarians were knocked out, that you were attacked in Salonika, that the ship carrying you was also attacked, and that there was an incident on your landing here: — it's obvious that all these things were stage-managed to call attention to you, for the purposes of . . . whoever staged them. Have you anything more to offer?"

"No," growled Coburn. "I've told all I know." He was furiously angry and felt completely helpless.

"Your information," purred the Skipper, "and the stage-managed incidents, make you look like a very patriotic citizen who is feared by the supposedly extra-terrestrial creatures. But we don't have to play any longer, Mr. Coburn. What were you told to tell your government? What do these . . . extra-terrestrials want?"

"My guess," snapped Coburn, "is that they want Earth."

The skipper raised his eyebrows. "Are you threatening us in their name?" he asked, purring.

"I'm telling you my guess," said Coburn hotly. "It's just as good as yours and no better! I have no instructions from them. I have no message from them. I've only my own opinion, which is that we humans had better get ready to fight. I believe we ought to join together — all of Earth — and get set to defend ourselves."

There was silence. Coburn found himself regarding the faces around him with an unexpected truculence. Janice pressed his hand warningly.

"All of Earth," said the skipper softly. "Hmmm. You advise an arrangement with all the earth. . . . What are your politics, Mr. Coburn? — No, let us say, what are the political views of the extra-terrestrial creatures you tell

us about? We have to know."

Coburn seethed. "If you're suggesting that this is a cold war trick," he said furiously, "— if they were faking it, they wouldn't try tricks! They'd make war! They'd try conquest!"

Coburn saw the stout Greek general nodding to himself. But the Skipper said suavely: "You were with one of the creatures, you say, up in the village of Náoussa. Would you say he seemed unfriendly to the Bulgarians?"

"He was playing the part of an Englishman," snapped Coburn, "trying to stop a raid, and murders, and possibly a war — all of them unnecessary!"

"You don't paint a frightening picture," complained the skipper ironically. "First you say we have to fight him and his kind, and then you imply that he was highly altruistic. What is the fact?"

"Dammit!" said Coburn. "I hated him because he wasn't human. It made my flesh crawl to see him act so much like a man when he wasn't. But he made me feel ashamed when I held a gun on him and he proved he wasn't human just so Janice — so Miss Ames wouldn't be afraid to drive down to Salonika with me!"

"So you have some . . . friendly feelings toward him, eh?" the skipper said negligently.

"How will you get in touch with his kind, by the way? *If* we should ask you to? Of course you've got

it all arranged? Just in case."

Coburn knew that absolutely nothing could be done with a man who was trying to show off his shrewdness to his listening superiors. He said disgustedly: "That's the last straw. Go to hell!"

A loud-speaker spoke suddenly. Its tone was authoritative, and there were little cracklings of static in it from its passage across the Atlantic.

"That line of questioning can be dropped, Captain. Mr. Coburn, did these aliens have any other chances to kill you?"

"Plenty!" snapped Coburn. "And easy ones. One of them came into my office as my secretary. She could have killed me. The man who passed for Major Pangalos could have shot us all while we were unconscious. I don't know why they didn't get the transport plane, and I don't know what their scheme is. I'm telling the facts. They're contradictory. I can't help that. All I have are the facts."

The loud-speaker said crisply: "The attack on the transport plane — any pilots present who were in that fight?"

Someone at the back said: "Yes, sir. Here."

"How good was their ship? Could it have been a guided missile?"

"No, sir. No guided missile. Whoever drove that ship was right on board. And that ship was

good. It could climb as fast as we could dive, and no human could have taken the accelerations and the turns it made. Whoever drove it learned fast, too. He was clumsy at the beginning, but he learned. If we hadn't gotten in a lucky hit he'd've had us where he wanted us in a little while more. Our fifty-calibres just bounced off that hull!"

The loud-speaker said curtly: "If that impression is justified, that's the first business to be taken up. All but flying officers are excused. Mr. Coburn can go, too."

There was a stirring everywhere in the room. Officers got up and walked out. Coburn stood. The Greek general came over to him and patted him on the shoulder, beaming. Janice went out with him. They arrived on the carrier's deck. This was the very earliest hour of dawn, and the conference had turned abruptly to a discussion of arms and tactics as soon as Washington realized that its planes were inadequate for fighting. Which was logical enough, but Coburn was pretty sure it was useless.

"If anybody else in the world feels as futile as I do," said Coburn bitterly, "I feel sorry for him!"

Janice said softly: "You've got me."

But that was less than complete comfort. It is inborn in a man that

he needs to feel superior. No man can feel pride before the woman of his choice while there is something stronger than himself. And Coburn especially wanted to feel that pride just now.

There were very probably discussions of the important part of what Coburn had reported, of course, during the rest of the morning. But there was much more discussion of purely military measures. And of course there were attempts to get military intelligence. Things were reported in the sky near South Africa, and from Honolulu — where nobody would ignore what a radar said again, especially the juiced-up equipment just modified on orders — and from other places. Not all the reports were authentic, of course. If there were any observations inside the Iron Curtain, the Iron Curtain countries kept them to themselves. Politics was much more important than anything else, in that part of the world.

But Coburn need not have felt as futile as he did. There was just one really spectacular occurrence in connection with the Invaders that day, and it happened where Coburn was. Almost certainly, it happened because Coburn was there. Though there is reason to believe that the newspaper campaign on shore, declaring that the American fleet risked the lives of all Naples by its mere presence,



had something to do with it too.  
It was very spectacular.

It happened just after midday when the city and its harbor were at their most glamorous. Coburn and Janice were above when it began. There was an ensign assigned to escort Coburn about and keep an eye on him, and he took them on a carefully edited tour of the carrier. He took them to the radar room which was not secret any longer. He explained reservedly that there was a new tricked-up arrangement of radar which it was believed would detect turtle-shaped metal ships if they appeared.

The radar room was manned, of course. It always was, with a cold war in being. Overhead, the bowl cages of the radars moved restlessly and rhythmically. Outside, on deck, the huge elevator that brought planes up from below rose at the most deliberate of peace-time rates.

The ensign said negligently, pointing to the radar-screen: "That little speck is a plane making for the landing field on shore. This other one is a plane coming down from Genoa. You'd need a good pair of binoculars to see it. It's a good thirty-five miles away."

Just then, one of the two radar-men on duty pushed a button and snapped into a microphone: "Sir! Radar-pip directly overhead! Does not show on normal radar. Ele-

vation three hundred thousand feet, descending rapidly." His voice cut off suddenly.

A metallic voice said: "Relay!"

The ensign in charge of Coburn and Janice seemed to freeze. The radar man pressed a button, which would relay that particular radar-screen's contents to the control room for the whole ship. There was a pause of seconds. Then bells began to ring everywhere. They were battle gongs.

There was a sensation of stirring all over the ship. Doors closed with soft hissings. Men ran furiously. The gongs rang.

The ensign said politely: "I'll take you below now."

He led them very swiftly to a flight of stairs. There was a monstrous bellowing on the carrier's deck. Something dark went hurtling down its length, with a tail of pale-blue flame behind it. It vanished. Men were still running. The elevator shot into full-speed ascent. A plane rolled off it. The elevator dropped.

An engine roared. Another. Yet another. A second dark and deadly thing flashed down the deck and was gone. There was a rumbling.

The battle gongs cut off. The rumbling below seemed to increase. There was a curious vibration. The ship moved. Coburn could feel that it moved. It was turning.

The ensign led them somewhere and said: "This is a good place.

"You'd better stay right here."

He ran. They heard him running. He was gone.

They were in a sort of ward room — not of the morning conference — and there were portholes through which they could look. The city which was Naples seemed to swing smoothly past the ship. They saw other ships. A cruiser was under way with its anchor still rising from the water. It dripped mud and a sailor was quite ridiculously playing a hose on it. It ascended and swayed and its shank went smoothly into the hawse-hole. There were guns swinging skyward. Some were still covered by canvas hoods. The hoods vanished before the cruiser swung out of the porthole's line of vision.

A destroyer leaped across the space they could see, full speed ahead. The water below them began to move more rapidly. It began to pass by with the speed of ground past an express train. And continually, monotonously, there were roarings which climaxed and died in the distance.

"The devil!" said Coburn. "I've got to see this. They can't kill us for looking."

He opened the door. Janice, holding fast to his arm, followed as he went down a passage. Another door. They were on the deck side of the island which is the superstructure of a carrier, and

they were well out of the way, and everybody in sight was too busy to notice them.

The elevator worked like the piston of a pump. It vanished and reappeared and a plane came off. Men in vividly-colored suits swarmed about it, and the elevator was descending again. The plane roared, shot down the deck, and was gone to form one of the sting of climbing objects which grew smaller with incredible swiftness as they shot for the sky. Coburn saw another carrier. There was a huge bow-wave before it. Destroyers ringed it, seeming to bounce in the choppy sea made by so many great ships moving so close together.

The other carrier, too, was shooting planes into the air like bullets from a gun. The American Mediterranean fleet was putting out to sea at emergency-speed, getting every flying craft aloft that could be gotten away. A cruiser swung a peculiar crane-like arm, there was a puff of smoke and a plane came into being. The crane retracted. Another plane. A third.

The fleet was out of the harbor, speeding at thirty knots, with destroyers weaving back and forth at higher speeds still. There were barges left behind in the harbor with sailors in them, — shore-parties or details who swore bitterly when they were left behind. They surged up and down on the

mêlée of waves the fleet left behind in its hasty departure.

On the fleet itself there was a brisk tenseness as it sped away from the land. Vesuvius still loomed high, but the city dwindled to a mere blinking mass of white specks which were its buildings. The sea was aglitter with sunlight reflected from the waves. There was the smell of salt air.

Men began to take cryptic measures for the future. They strung cables across the deck from side to side. Arresting gear for planes which would presently land.

Their special ensign found Coburn and Janice. "I'm supposed to stay with you," he explained politely. "I thought I could be of use. I'm really attached to another ship, but I was on board because of the hassle last night."

Coburn said: "This would be invader stuff, wouldn't it?"

The ensign shrugged. "Apparently. You heard what the radar said. Something at three hundred thousand feet, descending rapidly. It's not a human-built ship. Anyway, we've sent up all our planes. Jets will meet it first, at fifty thousand. If it gets through them there are . . . other measures, of course."

"This one beats me!" said Coburn. "Why?"

The ensign shrugged again. "They tried for you last night."

"I'm not that important, to

them or anybody else. Or am I?"

"I wouldn't know," said the ensign.

"I don't know anything I haven't told," said Coburn grimly, "and the creatures can't suppress any information by killing me now. Anyhow, if they'd wanted to they'd have done it."

A dull, faint sound came from high overhead. Coburn stepped out from under the shelter of the upper works of the island. He stared up into the sky. He saw a lurid spot of blue-white flame. He saw others. He realized that all the sky was interlaced with contrails — vapor-trails of jet-planes far up out of sight. But they were fine threads. The jets were up very high indeed. The pin-points of flame were explosions.

"Using wing-rockets," said the ensign hungrily, "since fifty-calibres did no good last night, until one made a lucky hit. Rockets with proximity fuses. Our jets don't carry cannon."

There were more explosions. There was a bright glint of reflected sunshine. It was momentary, but Coburn knew that it was from a flat, bright space-ship, which had tilted in some monstrously abrupt maneuver, and the almost vertical sunshine shone down from its surface.

The ensign said in a very quiet voice: "The fight's coming lower."

There was a crashing thump in the air. A battleship was firing

eight-inch guns almost straight up. Other guns began.

Guns began to fire on the carrier, too, below the deck and beyond it. Concussion waves beat at Coburn's body. He thrust Janire behind him to shield her, but there could be no shielding.

The air was filled with barkings and snarlings and the unbelievably abrupt roar of heavy guns. The carrier swerved, so swiftly that it tilted and swerved again. The other ships of the fleet broke their straight-away formation and began to move in bewildering patterns. The blue sea was criss-crossed with wakes. Once a destroyer seemed to slide almost under the bow of the carrier. The destroyer appeared unharmed on the other side, its guns all pointed skyward and emitting seemingly continuous blasts of flame and thunder.

The ensign grabbed Coburn's shoulder and pointed, his hands shaking.

There was the Invader ship. It was exactly as Coburn had known it would be. It was tiny. It seemed hardly larger than some of the planes that swooped at it. But the planes were drawing back now. The shining metal thing was no more than two thousand feet up and it was moving in erratic, unpredictable darts and dashes here and there, like a dragon-fly's movements, but a hundred times

more swift. Proximity-fused shells burst everywhere about it. It burst through a still-expanding puff of explosive smoke, darted down a hundred feet, and took a zig-zag course of such violent and angular changes of position that it looked more like a streak of metal lightning than anything else.

It was down to a thousand feet. It shot toward the fleet at a speed which was literally that of a projectile. It angled off to one side and back, and suddenly dropped again and plunged crazily through the maze of ships from one end to the other, no more than fifty feet above the water and with geysers of up-flung sea all about it from the shells that missed.

Then it sped away with a velocity which simply was not conceivable. It was the speed of a cannonball. It was headed straight toward a distant, stubby, draggled tramp-steamer which plodded toward the Bay of Naples.

It rose a little as it flew. And then it checked, in mid-air. It hung above the dumpy freighter, and there were salvos of all the guns in the fleet. But at the flashes it shot skyward. When the shells arrived and burst, it was gone.

It could still be sighted as a spark of sunlight shooting for the heavens. Jets roared toward it. It vanished.

Coburn heard the ensign saying in a flat voice: "If that wasn't

accelerating at fifteen Gs, I never saw a ship. If it wasn't accelerating at fifteen Gs . . ."

And that was all. There was nothing else to shoot at. There was nothing else to do. Jets ranged widely, looking for something that would offer battle, but the radars said that the metal ship had gone up to three hundred miles and then headed west and out of radar range. There had not been time for the French to set up paired radar-beam outfits anyhow, so they couldn't spot it, and in any case its course seemed to be toward northern Spain, where there was no radar worth mentioning.

Presently somebody noticed the dingy, stubby, draggled tramp steamer over which the Invaders' craft had hovered. It was no longer on course. It had turned sidewise and wallowed heavily. Its bow pointed successively to every point of the compass.

It looked bad. Salvos of the heaviest projectiles in the Fleet had been fired to explode a thousand feet above it. Perhaps —

A destroyer went racing to see. As it drew near — Coburn learned this later — it saw a man's body hanging in a sagging heap over the railing of its bridge. There was nobody visible at the wheel. There were four men lying on its deck, motionless.

The skipper of the destroyer went cold. He brought his ship

closer. It was not big, this tramp. Maybe two thousand tons. It was low in the water. It swayed and surged and wallowed and rolled.

Men from the destroyer managed to board it. It was completely unharmed. They found one small sign of the explosions overhead. One fragment of an exploded shell had fallen on board, doing no damage.

Even the crew was unharmed. But every man was asleep. Each one slumbered heavily. Each breathed stertorously. They could not be awakened. They would need oxygen to bring them to.

A party from the destroyer went on board to bring the ship into harbor. The officer in charge tried to find out the ship's name.

There was not a document to be found to show what the ship's name was or where it had come from or what it carried as cargo. That was strange. The officer looked in the pockets of the two men in the wheelhouse. There was not a single identifying object on either of them. He grew disturbed. He made a really thorough search. Every sleeping man was absolutely anonymous. Then — still on the way to harbor — a really fine-tooth-comb examination of the ship began.

Somebody's radium-dial watch began to glow brightly. The searchers looked at each other and went pale. They hunted fran-

tically, fear making them clumsy.

They found it. Rather — they found them.

The stubby tramp had an adequate if rather clumsy atomic bomb in each of its two holds. The lading of the ship was of materials which — according to theory — should be detonated in atomic explosion if an atomic bomb went off nearby. Otherwise they could not be detonated.

The anonymous tramp-steamer had been headed for the harbor of Naples, whose newspapers — at least those of a certain political party — had been screaming of the danger of an atomic explosion while American warships were anchored there.

It was not likely that two atom bombs and a shipload of valuable secondary atomic explosive had been put on a carefully nameless ship just to be taken for a ride. If this ship had anchored among the American fleet and if it had exploded in the Bay of Naples . . .

The prophecies of a certain political party would seem to have been fulfilled. The American ships would be destroyed. Naples itself would be destroyed. And it would have appeared that Europeans who loved the great United States had made a mistake.

It was, odd, though, that this ship was the only one that the Invaders' flying craft had struck with its peculiar weapon.

## VI

We humans are rational beings, but we are not often reasonable. Those who more or less handle us in masses have to take account of that fact. It could not be admitted that the fleet had had a fight with a ship piloted by Invaders from another solar system. It would produce a wild panic, beside which even a war would be relatively harmless. So the admiral of the Mediterranean fleet composed an order commending his men warmly for their performance in an unrehearsed firing-drill. Their target had been — so the order said — a new type of guided missile recently developed by hush-hush agencies of the Defense Department. The admiral was pleased and proud, and happy. . . .

It was an excellent order, but it wasn't true. The admiral wasn't happy. Not after battle photographs were developed and he could see how the alien ship had dodged rockets with perfect ease, and had actually taken a five-inch shell, which exploded on impact, without a particle of damage.

On the carrier, the Greek general said mildly to Coburn that the Invaders had used their power very strangely. After stopping an invasion of Greece, they had prevented an atomic-bomb explosion which would have killed

some hundreds of thousands of people. And it was strange that the turtle-shaped ship that had attacked the air transport was so clumsily handled as compared with this similar craft which had zestfully dodged all the missiles a fleet could throw at it.

Coburn thought hard. "I think I see," he said slowly. "You mean, they're here and they know all they need to know. But instead of coming out into the open, they're making governments recognize their existence. They're letting the rulers of Earth know they can't be resisted. But we did knock off one of their ships last night!"

The Greek general pointedly said nothing. Coburn caught his meaning. The fleet, firing point-blank, had not destroyed its target. The ship last night had seemed to fall into a cloud bank and explode. But nobody had seen it blow up. Maybe it hadn't.

"Humoring us!" realized Coburn. "They don't want to destroy our civilization, so they'll humor us. But they want our governments to know that they can do as they please. If our governments know we can't resist, they think we'll surrender. But they're wrong."

The Greek general looked at him enigmatically.

"We've still got one trick left," said Coburn. "Atomic bombs. And if they fail, we can still get

killed fighting them another way."

There was a heavy, droning noise far away. It increased and drew nearer. It was a multi-engined plane which came from the west and settled down, and hovered over the water, and touched and instantly created a spreading wake of foam.

The fleet was back at anchor then. It was enclosed in the most beautiful combination of city and scene that exists anywhere. Beyond the city the blunted cone of Vesuvius rose. In the city, newspaper vendors shrilly hawked denunciations of the American ships because of the danger that their atom bombs might explode. Well outside the harbor, a Navy crew of experts worked to make quite impossible the detonation of atomic bombs in a stubby tramp-steamer which had — plausibly, at least — been sent to make those same newspapers' prophecies of disaster come true.

A long, long time passed, while consultations took place to which Coburn was not invited. Then a messenger led him to the ward-room of the previous conference. He recognized the men who had landed by seaplane a while since. One was a cabinet member from Washington. There was someone of at least equal importance from London, picked up en route. There were generals and admirals. The service officers looked at Coburn

with something like accusation in their eyes. He was the means by which they had come to realize their impotence. The Greek general sat quietly in the rear.

"Mr. Coburn," said the Secretary from Washington. "We've been canvassing the situation. It seems that we simply are not prepared to offer effective resistance — not yet — to the . . . invaders you tell us about. We know of no reason why this entire fleet could not have been disabled as effectively as the tramp-steamer offshore. You know about that ship?"

Coburn nodded. The Greek general had told him. The Secretary went on painfully: "Now, the phenomena we have to ascribe to Invaders fall into two categories. One is the category of their action against the Bulgarian raiding force, and today the prevention of the cold-war murder of some hundreds of thousands of people. That category suggests that they are prepared — on terms — to be amiable. A point in their favor."

Coburn set his lips.

"The other group of events simply points you out and builds you up as a person of importance to these Invaders. You seem to be extremely important to them. They doubtless could have killed you. They did not. What they did do was bring you forward to official attention. Presumably they

had a realistic motive in this."

"I don't know what it could be," said Coburn coldly. "I blundered into one affair. I figured out a way to detect them. I happened to be the means by which they were proved to exist. That's all. It was an accident."

The Secretary looked skeptical. "Your discoveries were remarkably . . . apt. And it does seem clear that they made the appearance of hunting you, while going to some pains not to catch you. Mr. Coburn, how can we make contact with them?"

Coburn wanted to swear furiously. He was still being considered a traitor. Only they were trying to make use of his treason.

"I have no idea," he said grimly.

"What do they want?"

"I would say — Earth," he said grimly.

"You deny that you are an authorized intermediary for them?"

"Absolutely," said Coburn. There was silence. The Greek general spoke mildly from the back of the room. He said in his difficult English that Coburn's personal motives did not matter. But if the Invaders had picked him out as especially important, it was possible that they felt him especially qualified to talk to them. The question was, would he try to make contact with them?

The Secretary looked pained,



but he turned to Coburn. "Mr. Coburn?"

Coburn said, "I've no idea how to set about it, but I'll try on one condition. There's one thing we haven't tried against them. Set up an atom-bomb booby-trap; and I'll sit on it. If they try to contact me, you can either listen in or try to blow them up, and me with them!"

There was buzzing comment. Perhaps — Coburn's nails bit into his palms when this was suggested — perhaps this was a proposal to let the Invaders examine an atomic bomb, American-style. It was said in earnest simplicity. But somebody pointed out that a race which could travel between the stars and had ships such as the Mediterranean fleet had tried to shoot down, would probably find American atomic bombs rather primitive. Still —

The Greek general again spoke mildly. If the Invaders were to be made to realize that Coburn was trying to contact them, he should return to Greece. He should visibly take up residence where he could be approached. He should, in fact, put himself completely at the mercy of the Invaders.

"Ostensibly," agreed the Secretary.

The Greek general then said diffidently that he had a small villa some twenty miles from the suburbs of Salonika. The prevail-

ing winds were such that if an atomic explosion occurred there, it would not endanger anybody. He offered it.

"I'll live there," asked Coburn coldly, "and wait for them to come to me? I'll have microphones all about so that every word that's said will be relayed to your recorders? And there'll be a bomb somewhere about that you can set off by remote control? Is that the idea?"

Then Janice spoke up. And Coburn flared into anger against her. But she was firm. Coburn saw the Greek general smiling slyly.

They left the conference while the decision was made. And they were in private, and Janice talked to him. There are methods of argument against which a man is hopeless. She used them. She said that she, not Coburn, might be the person the Invaders might have wanted to take out of circulation, because she might have noticed something important she hadn't realized yet. When Coburn pointed out that he'd be living over an atomic bomb, triggered to be set off from a hundred miles away, she demanded fiercely to know if he realized how she'd feel if she weren't there to. . . .

Next day an aircraft carrier put out of Naples with an escort of destroyers. It traveled at full speed down the toe of Italy's boot, through the straits of Messina, across the Adriatic, and

rounded the end of Greece and went streaking night and day for Salonika. Special technicians sent by plane beat her time by days. The Greek general was there well ahead. And he expansively supervised while his inherited, isolated villa was prepared for the reception of Invaders — and Coburn and Janice.

And Coburn and Janice were married. It was an impressive wedding, because it was desirable for the Invaders to know about it. It was brilliantly military with uniforms and glittering decorations and innumerable important people whom neither of them knew or cared about.

If it had been anybody else's wedding Coburn would have found it unspeakably dreary. The only person present whom he knew beside Janice was Hallen. He acted as groomsman, with the air of someone walking on eggs. After it was over he shook hands with a manner of tremendous relief.

"Maybe I'll brag about this some day," he told Coburn uneasily. "But right now I'm scared to death. What do you two really expect to happen?"

Janice smiled at him. "Why," she said, "we expect to live happily ever after."

"Oh yes," said Hallen uncomfortably. "But that wasn't just what I had in mind."

The world wagged on. The newspapers knew nothing about super-secret top-level worries. There was not a single newsstory printed anywhere suggesting an invasion of Earth from outer space. There were a few more Flying Saucer yarns than normal, and it was beginning to transpire that an unusual number of important people were sick, or on vacation, or otherwise out of contact with the world. But, actually, not one of the events in which Coburn and Janice had been concerned reached the state of being news. Even the shooting off the Bay of Naples was explained as an emergency drill.

Quietly, a good many things happened. Cryptic orders passed around, and oxygen tanks were accumulated in military posts. Hunter and Mereid guided missiles were set up as standard equipment in a number of brand-new places. They were loaded for bear. But days went by, and nothing happened. Nothing at all. But officialdom was not at ease.

If anything — while the wide world went happily about its business — really high-level officialdom grew more unhappy day by day. Coburn and Janice flew back to Salonika. They went in a Navy plane with a fighter plane escort. They landed at the Salonika airport, and the Greek general

was among those who greeted them.

He took them out to the villa he'd placed at the disposal of high authority for their use. He displayed it proudly. There was absolutely no sign that it had been touched by anybody since its original builders had finished with it two-hundred-odd years before. The American officer who had wired it, though — he looked as if he were short a week's sleep — showed them how anywhere on the grounds or in the house they would need only to speak a code-word and they'd instantly be answered.

There were servants, and the Greek general took Coburn aside and assured him that there was one room which absolutely was not wired for sound. He named it.

So they took up a relatively normal way of life. Sometimes they decided that it would be pleasant to drive in to Salonika. They mentioned it, and went out and got in the car that went with the villa. Oddly, there was always some aircraft lazying about overhead by the time they were out of the gate. They always returned before sunset. And sometimes they swam in the water before the villa's door. Then, also, they were careful to be back on solid ground before sunset. That was so their guards out on the water wouldn't have to worry.

But it was a nagging and an un-

happy business to know that they were watched and overheard everywhere save in that one unwired room. It could have made for tension between them. But there was another thought to hold them together. This was the knowledge that they were literally living on top of a bomb. If an Invader's flying ship descended at the villa, everything that happened would be heard and seen by microphones and concealed television cameras. If the Invaders were too arrogant, or if they were arbitrary, there would be a test to see if their ship could exist in the heart of an atom-bomb explosion.

Coburn and Janice, then, were happy after a fashion. But nobody could call their situation restful.

They had very few visitors. The Greek general came out meticulously every day. Hallen came out once, but he knew about the atomic bomb. He didn't stay long. When they'd been in residence a week, the General telephoned zestfully that he was going to bring out some company. His English was so mangled and obscure that Coburn wondered cynically if whoever listened to their tapped telephone could understand him. But, said the General in high good humor, he was playing a good joke. He had hunted up Helena, who was Coburn's secretary, and he had also invited

Dillon to pay a visit to some charming people he knew. It would be a great joke to see Dillon's face.

There was a fire in the living room that night. The Greek servants had made it, and Coburn thought grimly that they were braver men and women than he'd have been. They didn't have to risk their lives. They could have refused this particular secret-service assignment. But they hadn't.

A voice spoke from the living-room ceiling, a clipped American voice. "Mr. Coburn, a car is coming."

That was standard. When the General arrived; when the occasional delivery of telephoned-for supplies came; on the one occasion when a peddler on foot had entered the ground. It lacked something of being the perfect atmosphere for a honeymoon, but it was the way things were.

Presently there were headlights outside. The Greek butler went to greet the guests. Coburn and Janice heard voices. The General was in uproarious good humor. He came in babbling completely uncomprehensible English.

There was Helena. She smiled warmly at Coburn. She went at once to Janice. "How do you do?" she said in her prettily accented English. "I have missed not working for your husband, but this is my fiancé!"

And Janice shook hands with a slick-haired young Greek who looked pleasant enough, but did not seem to her as remarkable as Coburn.

Then Dillon stared at Coburn. "The devil!" he said, with every evidence of indignation. "This is the chap —"

The General roared, and Coburn said awkwardly: "I owe you an apology, and the privilege of a poke in the nose besides. But it was a situation — I was in a state —"

Then the General howled with laughter. Helena laughed. Her fiancé laughed. And Dillon grinned amusedly at Coburn.

"My dear fellow!" said Dillon. "We are the guests this whole villa was set up to receive! The last time I saw you was in Náousa, and the last time Helena saw you you stuck pins in her, and —"

Coburn stiffened. He went slowly pale.

"I — see! You're the foam-suit people, eh?" Then he looked with hot passion at the General. "You!" he said grimly. "You I didn't suspect. You've made fools of all of us, I think."

The General said something obscure which could have been a proverb. It was to the effect that nobody could tell a fat man was cross-eyed when he laughed.

"Yes," said Dillon beaming. "He is fat. So his eyes don't look

like they're different. You have to see past his cheeks and eyebrows. That's how he passed muster. And he slept very soundly after the airport affair."

Coburn felt a sort of sick horror. The General had passed as a man, and he'd looted this villa, and he knew all about the installation of the atomic bomb. . . . Then Coburn looked through a doorway and there was his Greek butler standing in readiness with a submachine-gun in his hands.

"I take it this is an official call," said Coburn steadily. "In that case you know we're overheard — or did the General cancel that?"

"Oh, yes!" said Dillon. "We know all about the trap we've walked into. But we'd decided that the time had come to appear in the open anyhow. You people are very much like us, incidentally. Apparently there's only one real way that a truly rational brain can work. And we and you Earth people both have it. May we sit down?"

Janice said: "By all means!"

Helena sat, with an absolutely human gesture of spreading her skirt beside her. The General plumped into a chair and chuckled. The slick-haired young man politely offered Janice a cigarette and lighted Helena's for her. Dillon leaned against the mantel above the fire.

"Well?" said Coburn harshly. "You can state your terms. What do you want and what do you propose to do to get it?"

Dillon shook his head. He took a deep breath. "I want you to listen, Coburn. I know about the atom bomb planted somewhere around, and I know I'm talking for my life. You know we aren't natives of Earth. You've guessed that we come from a long way off. We do. Now — we found out the trick of space travel some time ago. You're quite welcome to it. We found it, and we started exploring. We've been in space, you might say, just about two of your centuries. You're the only other civilized race we've found. That's point one."

Coburn fumbled in his pocket. He found a cigarette. Dillon held a match. Coburn started, and then accepted it.

"Go on." He added, "There's a television camera relaying this, by the way. Did you know?"

"Yes, I know," said Dillon. "Now, having about two centuries the start of you, we have a few tricks you haven't found out yet. For one thing, we understand ourselves, and you, better than you do. We've some technical gadgets you haven't happened on yet. However, it's entirely possible for you to easily kill the four of us here tonight. If you do — you do. But there are others of our race here. That's point two."

"Now come the threats and demands," said Coburn.

"Perhaps." But Dillon seemed to hesitate. "Dammit, Coburn, you're a reasonable man. Try to think like us a moment. What would you do if you'd started to explore space and came upon a civilized race, as we have?"

Coburn said formidably, "We'd study them and try to make friends."

"In that order," said Dillon instantly. "That's what we've tried to do. We disguised ourselves as you because we wanted to learn how to make friends before we tried. But what did we

find, Coburn? What's your guess?"

"You name it!" said Coburn.

"You Earth people," said Dillon, "are at a turning-point in your history. Either you solve your problems and keep on climbing, or you'll blast your civilization down to somewhere near a caveman level and have to start all over again. You know what I mean. Our two more spectacular interferences dealt with it."

"The Iron Curtain," said Coburn. "Yes. But what's that got to do with you? It's none of your business. That's ours."

"But it *is* ours," said Dillon



"City Feller?"

urgently. "Don't you see, Coburn? You've a civilization nearly as advanced as ours. If we can make friends, we can do each other an infinite lot of good. We can complement each other. We can have a most valuable trade, not only in goods, but in what you call human values and we call something else. We'd like to start that trade.

"But you're desperately close to smashing things. So we've had to rush things. We did stop that Bulgarian raid. When you proved too sharp to be fooled, we grew hopeful. Here might be our entering wedge. We hammered at you. We managed to make your people suspicious that there might be something in what you said. We proved it. It was rugged for you, but we had to let you people force us into the open. If we'd marched out shyly with roses in our hair — what would you have thought?"

Coburn said doggedly: "I'm still waiting for the terms. What do you want?"

The General said something plaintive from his chair. It was to the effect that Coburn still believed that Earth was in danger of conquest from space.

"Look!" said Dillon irritably. "If you people had found the trick of space travel first, and you'd found us, would you have tried to conquer us? Considering that we're civilized?"

Coburn said coldly, "No. Not

my particular people. We know you can't conquer a civilized race. You can exterminate them, or you can break them down to savagery, but you can't conquer them. You can't conquer us!"

Then Dillon said very painstakingly: "But we don't want to conquer you. Even your friends inside the Iron Curtain know that the only way to conquer a country is to smash it down to savagery. They've done that over and over for conquest. But what the devil good would savages be to us? We want someone to trade with. We can't trade with savages. We want someone to gain something from. What have savages to offer us? A planet? Good Heavens, man! We've already found sixty planets for colonies, much better for us than Earth. Your gravity here is . . . well, it's sickeningly low."

"What *do* you want then?"

"We want to be friends," said Dillon. "We'll gain by it exactly what you Earth people gained when you traded freely among yourselves, before blocked currencies and quotas and such nonsense strangled trade. We'll gain what you gained when you'd stopped having every city a fort and every village guarded by the castle of its lord. Look, Coburn: we've got people inside the Iron Curtain. We'll keep them there. You won't be able to disband your armies, but we can promise you won't have to use them — be-

cause we certainly won't help you chaps fight among yourselves. We'll give you one of our ships to study and work on. But we won't give you our arms. You'll have your moon in a year and your whole solar system in a decade. You'll trade with us from the time you choose, and you'll be roaming space when you can grasp the trick of it. Man, you can't refuse. You're too near to certain smashing of your civilization, and we can help you to avoid it. Think what we're offering."

Then Coburn said grimly: "And if we don't like the bargain? What if we refuse?"

Dillon carefully put the ash from his cigarette into an ashtray. "If you won't be our friends," he said with some distaste, "we can't gain anything useful from you. We don't want you as slaves. You'd be no good to us. For that reason we can't get anything we want from the Iron Curtain people. They've nothing to offer that we can use. So our ultimatum is — make friends or we go away and leave you alone. Take it or leave it!"

There was a dead, absolute silence. After a long time Coburn said: "Altruism?"

Dillon grinned. "Enlightened self-interest. Common sense!"

There was a clicking in the ceiling. A metallic voice said: "Mr. Coburn, the conversation just

overheard and recorded has to be discussed in detail on high diplomatic levels. It will take time for conferences — decisions — arrangements. Assuming that your guests are acting in good faith, they have safe conduct from the villa. Their offer is very attractive, but it will have to be passed on at high policy-making levels."

Dillon said pleasantly, to the ceiling: "Yes. And you've got to keep it from being public, of course, until your space ships can discover us somewhere. It will have to be handled diplomatically, so your people are back of a grand offer to make friends when it happens." He added wryly, "We're very much alike, really. Coburn's very much like us. That's why — if it's all right with you — you can arrange for him to be our point of confidential contact. We'll keep in touch with him."

The ceiling did not reply. Dillon waited, then shrugged. The Greek general spoke. He said that since they had come so far out from Salonika, it was too early to leave again. It might be a good idea to have a party. Some music would be an excellent thing. He said he liked Earth music very much.

A long time later Janice and Coburn were alone in the one room of the house which was not wired for sound. There were no microphones here.

Coburn said reluctantly in the



darkness: "It sounds sensible all right. Maybe it's true. But it feels queer to think of it. . . ."

Janice pressed closer to him and whispered in his ear: "I made friends with that girl who passed for Helena. I like her. She says we'll be invited to make a trip to their planet. They can do something about the gravity. And she says she's really going to be married to the . . . person who was

with her. . . ." She hesitated. "She showed me what they really look like when they're not disguised as us."

Coburn put his arm around her and smiled gently. "Well? Want to tell me?"

Janice caught her breath. "I — I could have cried. . . . The poor thing — to look like that. I'm glad I look like I do. For you, darling. For you."

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FROM the January 1850 issue of *Scientific American*: "It has been truly observed that the progress of science for the last century has outstripped all calculation, and left even the wildest imagination far in the rear. Is this astonishing progress to continue; and will nature in years to come yield to man her long treasured secrets as willingly as she does now? If so, what mortal shall venture to limit the boundaries of human knowledge, or the power of human skill? 'There is indeed,' says a late writer, 'no reason why the earth should not supply us with water hot, as well as cold, anymore, perhaps, than why mechanical attrition or compressed air, should not keep us warm, and the electric fluid light our streets and houses, convey our messages, set our clocks going, and possibly also perform some of our hard work.'"



HERE'S one place where the law of mathematics doesn't hold true: 2 plus 2 equals 3½. When it's two quarts of water mixed with two quarts of alcohol. And the reason: Ethyl alcohol contracts in volume when you mix it with water, due to the reduction of the molecular interstices of the two substances in the chemical combination.

## MARS CONFIDENTIAL

(Continued from page 19)

*Interstellar space:* Too much nothing at all, filled with rockets, flying saucers, advanced civilizations, and discarded copies of *Amazing Stories*.

*Mars:* A candy bar.

*Pluto:* A kind of water.

*Ray guns:* Small things that go zap.

*Time machine:* A machine that carries you back to yesterday and into next year. Also, an alarm clock.

*Time warp:* The hole in time the time machine goes through to reach another time. A hole in nothing.

*Terra:* Another name for Earth. It comes from *terra firma* or something like that.

*Hyperdrive:* The motor that is used to drive a space ship faster than the speed of light. Invented by science-fiction writers but not yet patented.

*Ether:* The upper reaches of space and whatever fills them. Also, an anaesthetic.

*Luna:* Another name for the Moon. Formerly a park in Coney Island.

## PROJECT NIGHTMARE

(Continued from page 39)

Reynolds looked at the woman with him. "Dorothy Brentano!" "Dorothy Smith now."

He controlled his trembling and explained what was required. She nodded. "I figured that out on the plane. Got a pencil? Take this: St. Louis — a river warehouse with a sign reading 'Bartlett & Sons, Jobbers'. Look in the loft. And Houston — no, they got that one. Baltimore — it's in a ship at the docks, the *S. S. Gold Coast*. What other cities? I've wasted time feeling around where there was nothing to find."

Reynolds was already shouting for Washington to answer.

Grandma Wilkins was last to be relieved; Dorothy located one in the Potomac — and Mrs. Wil-

kins told her sharply to keep trying. There were four bombs in Washington, which Mrs. Wilkins had known all along. Dorothy found them in eleven minutes.

Three hours later Reynolds showed up in the club messroom, not having been able to sleep. Several of his people were eating and listening to the radio blast about our raid on Russia. He gave it a wide berth; they could blast Omsk and Tomsk and Minsk and Pinsk; today he didn't care. He was sipping milk and thinking that he would never drink coffee again when Captain Mikeler bent over his table. "The General wants you. Hurry!"

"Why?"

"I said, 'Hurry!' Where's

Grandma Wilkins — oh — see her. Who is Mrs. Dorothy Smith?"

Reynolds looked around. "She's with Mrs. Wilkins."

Mikeler rushed them to Hanby's office. Hanby merely said, "Sit over there. And you ladies, too. Stay in focus."

Reynolds found himself looking into a television screen at the President of the United States. He looked as weary as Reynolds felt, but he turned on his smile. "You are Doctor Reynolds?"

"Yes, Mr. President!"

"Those ladies are Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes, sir."

The President said quietly,

"You three and your colleagues will be thanked by the Republic. And by me, for myself. But that must wait. Mrs. Smith, there are more bombs — in Russia. Could your strange gift find them there?"

"Why, I don't — I can try!"

"Mrs. Wilkins, could you set off those Russian bombs while they are still far away?"

Incredibly, she was still bright-eyed and chipper. "Why, Mr. President!"

"Can you?"

She got a far-away look. "Dorothy and I had better have a quiet room somewhere. And I'd like a pot of tea. A large pot."

## TURNOVER POINT (Continued from page 75)

still at last. A wild-eyed thing that may once have been a man stared in horror at the fading light of the yellow star far astern.

It had taken Kane time to understand what had happened to him, and now it was too late. Space had taken care of its own. The air in *The Luck* was growing foul and the food was gone. Death hung in the fetid atmosphere of the tiny control room.

The old man — the boy — the money. They all seemed to spin in a narrowing circle. Kane wanted suddenly to shriek with laughter. A circle. The turnover circle. The full circle that the old man had

made instead of the proper half-turn of a turnover. Three hundred sixty degrees instead of one hundred eighty. Three hundred sixty degrees to leave the nose of *The Luck* pointing outward toward the stars, instead of properly toward the Sun. A full circle to pile G on G until the Jovian moons were missed, and the Uranian moons and Triton, too. *Ad Astra per Ardua*. . . .

With the last fragment of his failing sanity, Kane thought of how Pop Ganlon and the boy must be laughing. He was still thinking that as the long night closed in around him.

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